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OXFORD

The Outcaste

Akkarmashi

SHARANKUMAR LIMBALE

Translated

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Akkarmashi

Sharankumar Limbale

Translated from Marathi by

SANTOSH BHOOMKAR

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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to
MASAMAI, my mother

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Author's Note

My history is my mother's life, at the most my grandmother's. My ancestry doesn't go back any further.

My mother is an untouchable, while my father is a high caste from one of the privileged classes of India. Mother lives in a hut, father in a mansion. Father is a landlord; mother, landless. I am an *akkarmashi* (half-caste). I am condemned, branded illegitimate.

I regard the immorality of my father and mother as a metaphor for rape. My father had privileges by virtue of his birth granted to him by the caste system. His relationship with my mother was respected by society, whereas my mother is untouchable and poor. Had she been born into the high caste or were she rich, would she have submitted to his appropriation of her? It is through the Dalit movement and Dalit literature that I understood that my mother was not an adulteress but the victim of a social system. I grow restless whenever I read about a rape in the newspaper. A violation anywhere in the country, I feel, is a violation of my mother.

I have put in words the life I have lived as an untouchable, as a half caste, and as an impoverished man. There is a Patil in every village who is also a landowner. He invariably has a whore. I have written this so that readers will learn the woes of the son of a whore. High-caste people look upon my community as untouchable, while my own community

humiliated me, calling me 'akkarmashi'. This humiliation was like being stabbed over and over again. I have always lived with the burden of inferiority. And this book is a tale of this burden.

Akkarmashi was published when I was only 25. Although a stormy debate followed its publication, I also became very popular and well-known. The work has already been translated into many Indian languages. The book brought me the status of a successful writer. The present translation of it into English will bring the grievances of Dalits into public, possibly world, focus.

Akkarmashi is a work in the dialect of the Dalits. My friend Santosh Bhoomkar has created a space for a social problem in the literary circle of the world by translating it. Saying thanks for it would be a mere formality. My true feelings are beyond words. Though we have never met, I feel as close to Mini Krishnan as I do to my nearest kin. She worked for three years, struggling to carry my writing into English. I cannot remember how many times we discussed it, over the phone, the fax, through letters, or email. Her meticulous efforts to bring the book to its present shape is very precious to me. I have to my credit her warm friendship. I also wish to acknowledge Sudhakar Marathe who helped Mini with the last draft.

I hope readers all over the world will consider *Akkarmashi* sympathetically and share my agony. It is the pain of millions in India.

SHARANKUMAR LIMBALE

Translator's Note

I am happy that my translation of *Akkarmashi* is being published by an internationally renowned publishing house like Oxford University Press.

A disciple's greatest joy lies in being recognized by his mentor, the disciple being myself and the mentor Prof. Bhalchandra Nemade. Besides his status as a major modern Marathi novelist he was my teacher both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. I have always looked up to him with awe and reverence. Since his departure from Aurangabad to Goa in the mid-seventies we have hardly been in touch. Then one morning in March 1997 he wrote asking if I would like to translate

Akkarmashi. Overwhelmed, and without thinking, I instantly replied saying 'yes.'

I had heard about *Akkarmashi* but had had no occasion to read it. I knew its reputation as a landmark in Marathi Dalit literature. Now under commission when I read it, a sense of inadequacy gripped me as it was a formidable text to translate because of the kind of Marathi the author had used. With great determination and assiduity I worked on the text, and it yielded to some extent. Seeing a ray of hope I continued. Undoubtedly it was a difficult, often irritating and frustrating task.

I hope my mentor Prof. Nemade finds this translation up to the mark and he will not regret having assigned this work to me for which I have no words to thank him.

Dr Sharankumar Limbale, the author of *Akkarmashi* has been very prompt in replying to my letters and telephone calls. He provided me with meanings of words and phrases which were otherwise not available in any dictionary nor known to anybody around me, except him. This made my job immensely easier.

I have had translated the first edition of *Akkarmashi* (1984). When I had almost completed work with it the author sent me the second edition (1990) and suggested I incorporate the changes. It was not a very difficult task as the changes were not too many. Then recently again the author sent the third and entirely new version of *Akkarmashi* under the new title *Akkarmashi Again* (*Poonha Akkarmashi*, 1999). This time too the author suggested I follow the new text. As I read it and compared it with the original one I found it impossible to follow the author's suggestion to incorporate the changes. It was written in an entirely different manner. The original text was a dialect of Marathi whereas the new version is in standard Marathi. In the new version the original flavour appeared to be missing. The narrator was now a mature man with firm convictions. The tone was also rather polemical and he consciously made a noise as against the boyishly naïve narrator of the 1984 original. Moreover the names of many characters had been changed, some characters dropped and new ones added. Even the original sequence of the story was reshuffled to a great extent, as some events were omitted and new ones added. I felt that the merging of the latest version with the original

would not only be impossible but in some sense unfair. I can understand the author's anxiety but I too was anxious about the whole matter. I have nothing negative to say about *Poonha Akkarmashi*, my only objection being the incongruity of merging the two. Undoubtedly *Poonha Akkarmashi* will be judged on its own merit and will have its own significance. I firmly believe that this third and new version needs an entirely different translation.

In spite of such tensions between Limbale and me, I am glad the author considered my point of view and consented to the translation of the original *Akkarmashi*.

How do I thank Ms Mini Krishnan? Once in touch she has been prompt, efficient, firm and considerate—a unique blend of qualities. She alone is responsible for improving—by way of correcting, changing, omitting and adding to—my version of the translation. Working with her has been a delightful and rewarding experience. What I see as her complete control of language has no doubt immensely enriched my translation. My grateful thanks to her! I also wish to acknowledge Sudhakar Marathe for his valuable suggestions.

SANTOSH BHOOMKAR

Introduction

Implicit in every literary work of significance is a serious critique of the society within which it takes birth. However, rarely do a number of such works get produced within a relatively short span of time. Rarely do they change not just the established literary idiom but also the thought processes and the social ethics of the community of readers. When this does happen, literary history describes the phenomenon as a literary movement. A movement strikes the heart of a social issue in such a manner that it becomes impossible for any sensitive reader to return to the old values with any sense of comfort. A movement goes much beyond a mere style-shift and spearheads a great social change too. In the rich history of India's numerous languages one can think of the great Bhakti movement, initiated by a series of saint-poets who posed profound metaphysical questions as a literary movement bringing about a seminal social reform. Bhakti was a phenomenal literary movement spread over several centuries of India's medieval history. The Dalit literary movement that has been flourishing in Marathi—as in several other Indian languages such as Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi and Gujarati—during the last four decades will probably be recognized by the future historians of Indian literature and society as another such movement.

The Dalit Movement

If one had to draw a comparison between the Dalit literary movement and any movement in world literature, the proper candidates for

comparison would not be the Anglo-German Romantic movement or the French-German-English Modernist movement. For, despite their greatness, depth and impact, neither shows the concern with social justice as explicitly and sharply as does the Dalit movement. Perhaps it stands a better chance of being understood if it is compared with Russian literature at the turn of the nineteenth century or the Black Literature movement of Afro-American origin during the twentieth century. It may even be justifiably compared with the great Protestant movement in Europe at the beginning of the Renaissance. While the Dalit literary movement has made Marathi society think afresh about religion, justice, dignity and social relationships, the single most important concern on which it has expended its energy has been 'caste'. In order to understand the nature of the movement and the achievements and failures of every writer involved in it, it is necessary to state what the notion of caste has been and how it has conditioned Indian society.

Caste and Identity

The phenomenon of caste as a status marker has probably been the most unique feature of Indian society. The origin of the notion of caste is so obscure and its manifestation in social life is so complicated that it is almost impossible to think of it as a 'system' with 'rules' that can be articulated and reasoned out. Questions, such as 'Can one change one's caste?', 'Is the caste hierarchy defined in any absolute terms?' and 'Does a given caste originate in a given social function?' can be answered both in the negative and in the affirmative. Sociologists acknowledge that while caste identities have continued to deepen, there is also at work a process called 'Sanskritization' in Indian society which permits caste groups to evade their identity and achieve an upward social mobility. For instance, a whole class of peasants that included several 'lower' castes claimed the Patel caste during the nineteenth century in Gujarat owing to its economic progress. Besides, while it is true that one's caste continues to stick to one's identity throughout one's life, there also occurs a continuous fragmentation of a larger caste group into numerous sub-caste groups, creating in the process a hierarchic stratification within what had been a single caste. All in all, 'caste' is a lived social experience in India more than a prescribed mode of social classification. At its source

has been a series of scriptural sanctions (varna system) unfortunately read without their original metaphysical content. On the other hand, at the tapering end of the concept of caste is its ability to gel with the notion of economic class, which allows it to come off at the edges and permits individuals to gradually acquire a new caste identity. Yet it cannot be denied that for a variety of very complex reasons Indian society has kept the caste-convention alive; and despite the massive changes brought in by industrialization, urbanization and migrations, the caste-convention is showing no signs of decline or slackening. Besides, the policy of positive discrimination enshrined in the Indian Constitution has led to a further crystallization of caste identities even if the goal of that policy was to eliminate inequality arising out of the marginalization of certain castes.

The social stratification and injustice arising out of the concept of caste attached to the accident of birth have been faced and questioned repeatedly by thinkers and social reformers throughout the history of India. In the Indian tradition, all functions involving labour, leaving aside the function of governing, learning and trading, were reserved for the Shudras. The menial nature of the work, the exclusion from the forms and institutions of learning, the perverse notion of pollution attached to the occupations in which the Shudras were engaged, and the perpetual economic inequality, all of which continued to exist for centuries, made the life of the Shudras a relentless story of suffering and injustice. The deprivation of the Shudras continued endlessly since the economic motives received a religious sanction from the Brahmin class that had been entrusted with the upkeep of the scriptures. It was natural, therefore, that every attempt at rescuing the sanctity of the scriptures also became an attempt at challenging the varna system. During medieval times, in every part of India, such attempts were made by social reformers and spiritual leaders, whom we now recognize as the saint-poets. However, given the eclectic and retentive nature of Indian culture, their efforts at challenging the varnas resulted in adding to the fold many new sects without replacing the varnas altogether. In the course of time, the more powerful among the sects acquired the form of a new religion such as Sikhism; but in most cases such newly founded sects absorbed the characteristics of the old varnas and came to be recognized as many

new castes. Even Islam and Christianity did not escape the fate of being fragmented in caste terms when they were received in India. Besides, though the saint-poets had a purely humanitarian agenda before them, and propagated the equality of beings, the basis of their world view was metaphysical rather than material. The Bhakti movement therefore did not succeed in reforming the Indian society and its caste-based character.

Writings

It was Dr B.R. Ambedkar who, in the twentieth century, took up the most comprehensive and rational crusade that India has ever seen against the injustice and deprivation resulting from caste discrimination. The Dalit literary movement is a result of his powerful articulation of the place of the Dalits and the need to recognize their human dignity, which remains a seminal contribution to the social discourse of pre-independence India. Himself a Dalit born in the Mahar community, Ambedkar rose to a position of eminence as a social activist, an educationist, a legal expert and a nationally respected leader of Dalits in India. His approach to the question of religion was that of a democratic rationalist; and towards the end of his career as a leader of Dalits, he embraced Buddhism in order to free millions of his followers from the tyranny of caste discrimination.

When one thinks of a modern-day inheritor of the legacy of the medieval Indian saints, one naturally thinks of Mahatma Gandhi. He did agitate against the evils of untouchability throughout his life. He did everything to lift the scavengers who were forced into the occupation of cleaning latrines and carrying the night-soil on their heads. He faced great opposition from his orthodox supporters when he admitted untouchable persons as inmates in his ashram. The term Harijan, meaning 'God's people', used for the so-called 'low' castes, was popularized by Gandhi. However, Ambedkar preferred the term Dalit which means 'the oppressed'. He thought that Gandhi was not prepared to go far enough in the direction of the emancipation of the Dalits. Ambedkar felt deeply anguished by the reluctance of the nationalist movement led by the Congress and Mahatma Gandhi to confront the caste problem head-on and eliminate the caste discrimination altogether. In *What Gandhi and Congress Have Done to the Untouchables* (1945), Ambedkar claimed that

Gandhi never wanted to 'hurt' the interests of the upper-caste Hindus. He argued:

In Gandhism, the common man has no hope. It treats man as an animal and no more. It is true that man shares the constitution and functions of animals, nutritive, reproductive, etc. But these are not distinctively human functions. The distinctively human function is reason, the purpose of which is to enable man to observe, meditate, cogitate, study and discover the beauties of the universe and enrich his life and control the animal elements in his life.

Ambedkar further argues that such a possibility will exist only in a truly democratic society where equality is the basis of the social contract:

Gandhism may be well-suited to a society which does not accept democracy as its ideal. A society which does not believe in democracy may be indifferent to machinery and the civilization based on it. But a democratic society cannot. The former may well content itself with a life of leisure and culture for the few and a life of toil and drudgery for the many. But a democratic society must assure a life of leisure and culture to each one of its citizens.

In order to create a truly democratic society in which the Dalits enjoy equality and find their rightful place, Ambedkar asked them 'to educate, organize and agitate'. He himself did all the three throughout his active social life. Ambedkar's life and work have continued to inspire Dalit activists all over India; however, the maximum following that his teaching has received is concentrated in Maharashtra.

Ambedkar was a thinker, leader, and activist. He was not a literary artist. As an activist, he was leading a mass of people that had never before received the benefits of literacy. Another major adversary of Gandhi, a contemporary of Ambedkar and the prime advocate of Hindutva, V.D. Savarkar used literature as a medium for his political work. Savarkar, recognized by his contemporaries as a poet, was addressing the literate class. Ambedkar's writings on the other hand were either scholarly, as his major thesis on the origins of the Shudras (*Who Were the Shudras?*, 1946) or merely functional and in the nature of reports and refutations. All three—Savarkar, Gandhi, and Ambedkar—influenced thought and literature in Marathi; but while Savarkar's influence remained confined to a small circle of political obscurantists, and Gandhi's influence turned

into a sentimental idealism, Ambedkar's influence has kept inspiring Dalit writers for the last four decades and has led to an epochal change in the literary idiom. It would indeed be inappropriate to seek the genesis of Dalit writing entirely in Ambedkar's thought alone. Several other factors have contributed to its emergence and development in a significant measure. Among them can be counted the growth of the cities and the migration from villages, the spread of education in rural Maharashtra, and the rise of political awareness among the marginalized. Most importantly, there has occurred a major shift in the sociology of Marathi literature. During the last three to four decades the social class that had previously provided patronage to literature and had participated in its creation and development kept moving closer to the English language for education and livelihood. Those who had previously been kept outside the pale of literary activity kept moving closer to institutional learning and took over the function of writing creative literature and reading it. These developments were aided by the new-found political independence. However, the freedom that came did not suddenly end the darkness pervading the life of the Dalits. In the initial years after independence, the practice of untouchability continued without much change.

Looking Back

The newly introduced land tenancy act, which should have ensured a transfer of land ownership to the tillers, resulted in an increase in caste conflict. Similarly, the two residues of historical claims to political power, one by the landholding Marathas rooted in the memory of the seventeenth-century Maratha kingdom of Shivaji, and the other by the educated Brahmins looking back to the Peshwas of the latter-day Maratha empire, intensified the caste consciousness and caste strife in every sphere of public life. The entire discourse in the public domain in Maharashtra for about a quarter of a century after independence was dominated by the caste rivalry between the Brahminical castes and the landholding 'Maratha' caste(s). In it the untouchables, the landless labourers, the nomadic tribes were left out entirely. To make matters worse, the older village structure, which had in the past some provision for those on the social fringes, began to change rapidly. The barter system and the rigid distribution of

occupations started giving way to an economy rapidly gravitating towards the cash-crop wealth and the politics of cooperative management. While the spectacular changes in agricultural technology and the development of cooperative movements started vying with the industrialized cities in making Maharashtra prosperous, the castes on the fringes of the society and economy were driven to unprecedented hunger and humiliation.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the traditional entertainer had some patronage which started disappearing in the years after independence. The result was that those castes and communities had to move from village to village in search of daily wages or charity. Thanks to the widening network of primary schools, some of the children from these communities found accidental access to those schools and managed to get glimpses of the glory kept hidden from them for over two thousand years, the glory called the alphabet. It was these children, growing up under the influence of the social awakening initiated by Ambedkar, who gave themselves to writing, like virgin land giving itself to new seeds with fecundity.

The communities that had been branded as 'criminal' by the colonial government through a series of legal enactments beginning in 1871, and that had been confined to seclusion in designated 'settlements', were denotified in 1952. These had been primarily nomadic communities. These nomadic communities, the landless peasant, the untouchable castes, the migratory labourers, the itinerant entertainers, in short, all the dispossessed of Indian society were together facing the want of a proper livelihood and an absence of social justice. The neo-literates among them who started voicing their suffering, provided testimonies of what life in the twilight at the margins was like and brought to Marathi literature the shock of an idiom and sentiment that were native to the writers, but completely new to the readers of literary Marathi. When these neo-literate rebel figures realized the power of their literary expression, the desire to use it more potently and for more pervasive self-articulation spread in these communities, creating in its wake a self-awareness of being a Dalit literary movement. The dynamism of such movements is derived from the intensity of emotion they reveal, and the energy that drives them is drawn from an urge for self-assertion. Naturally, therefore,

the early articulation of such movements takes the form of poetry and their more confident expression is seen in autobiographical narratives.

Emergence of Literature

When Dalit literature started emerging in the 1960s, Marathi literary taste was dominated by a narcissistic tendency that foregrounded merely formalistic, non-confrontationist, and titillating works. One of the central debates in that era was focused on an 'art for art's sake' or 'art for life's sake' kind of issue. It was in the 1960s that little magazines started challenging the urban-biased and excessively individualistic mainstream writing. The earliest writings by Dalit writers were published first in these little magazines. Some of these had grown up in the poor quarters of Bombay, others had moved from their rural locations to the fast growing metropolis. And most were attracted to trade unions or left parties. Annabhau Sathe, Baburao Bagul, Yashwant Manohar, Namdeo Dhasal, and Narayan Surve are the more significant among these. The formation of the new Maharashtra state out of the old Bombay province in 1960, which created Bombay as the main centre of trade unions, and the launching of a militant Dalit Panthers movement in 1972 brought the Dalit literary movement to the notice of the Marathi literary circles. The tone of the movement was set during these years. Narayan Surve, a trade unionist, wrote moving poems about the youthful workers involved in campaigns, and sex-worker mothers anxious about their children's education. The poems used language exactly as it is spoken by these unfortunate young men and women leading a life of misery in Bombay. Namdeo Dhasal, on the other hand, wrote poetry closer to the modernist sensibility but with an unmistakable stamp of the anger of a rebel. In his celebrated collection *Golpitha*, he writes:

> I curse you, curse your book
> Curse your culture, your hypocrisy—
> I wasn't going to say this
> but now my hands have woken up.

A blend of pathos and protest has by now become the defining feature of Dalit literature. Dalit poetry combines the rebellion against social injustice with dreams of a life of dignity for the oppressed.

These elements can be seen in equal degree in autobiography. Besides, the wider span provided by the medium allows the writers to bring in details of a life which for the mainstream reader is an unknown world. The first major autobiography by a Dalit writer was Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (Social Claim, 1978). Before *Baluta*, Pawar had been writing poems; but his literary reputation has come to rest upon his autobiography which is a transparent account of a sensitive person trying to emancipate himself from the stigma of untouchability. It presents the plight of a migrant and lonely person trying to protect himself from the tyranny of caste as well as the dogma of a protest. Laxman Mane's *Upara* (Outsider, 1980), which is perhaps the most popular of the Dalit autobiographies, depicts the perennial poverty of the Kaikadi community and the social tensions between the higher castes and the Kaikadis, and most important, the growth of a political consciousness. It is an account of the life of an activist. So is Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya* (Petty Thief, 1987). While Mane's narrative hits hard at caste discrimination, Gaikwad's excels in depicting a greater ethnographic range. It describes the Bhamta community of petty thieves, or rather the poor ones forced into a life of thieving, to which Laxman Gaikwad belongs and within which he was brought up. The life story shows him passing through a process of ideological initiation that leads him to uplift the community from a social mire. Under the influence of these autobiographies, a large number of Dalit neo-literate writers have written and published their life accounts, many of them being the authors' only literary production. Some of these are by women writers as well; for instance, Baby Kamble's *Jin Amuch*! (Such is Our Life!).

The world of experience described in the autobiographies was entirely new to the readers of Marathi. Earlier too, poverty and suffering had been depicted in Marathi literature, but the Dalit autobiography was not interested in depicting poverty as a generalized subject per se. It spoke of poverty as a social issue, a result of caste exclusion and in need of major social reforms. This depiction was done by those who had themselves suffered from the exclusion and had thought about it as a larger collective problem. For instance, in Kishore Kale's *Kolhatye Che Por* (A Kolhati Child) there is the depiction of the Kolhati dancing girls and their exploitation.

'Kisrya, have you washed the clothes? If not, I'll be in trouble.' It never ended. People were rude and insulting to me, since a young Kolhati boy obviously could not command any respect from the kind of people who came there. I was a delicate-looking boy, and some of the men kissed me. The monotony of the song and dance routine every single evening was terribly boring. And laughing faces affected me deeply and made me very depressed. For the women and for me, life seemed to hold no hope of happiness. In fact, their lives were sunk in a deeper darkness than mine.

In Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya*, hunger is an all-pervasive context for the autobiography. The entire narration is acutely informed by what may be called the politics of hunger.

But at home we were nearly starving. Sometimes there was no food in the house for four or five days. Sometimes we cooked broken or coarsely ground grain, but mostly it was milo (cheap grain). There were too many mouths to feed. At intervals we bought a kilo of milo from a ration shop. We used to coarse grind it. It was full of worms and insects, but we were so hungry that we greedily drank that hot, insect-ridden gruel without ever bothering to filter out the bugs.

Each of us received four large spoons of that thin gruel. I used to drink my gruel and also some from the shares of Anna or Bhau. Hence I never sat for meals without them. I would keep watch, and when Anna and Bhau sat for their gruel I sat with them. My sisters-in-law did not like this—they got angry because I ate from their husbands' shares—but still I sat with them like a shameless fellow. When Bhau and Anna did not give me any of their share, I would rub my plate and lick my hands, and then lick the plate with my tongue. I used to stare at Bhau's and Anna's gruel greedily, so even when they were hungry they angrily offered me some of theirs, muttering, 'Lakshimanya is like a curse.' Even then my hunger would not be fully satisfied; I would scrape whatever was stuck at the bottom of the pot and eat that, too. I never got even a single full meal a day.

The transition from the poetry of the 1960s to the autobiography of the 1980s marked a major shift in the self-assessment of the Dalit writers. Though poetry expressed in full measure the Dalit anxiety to be counted as humans, it had to depend on the forms and conventions of poetry available in the Marathi tradition as well as the modern poetry written under the influence of Western Modernist literature. Dalit autobiography, on the other hand, had no models before it to copy from. They were

not autobiographies of persons at the fag-end of their lives, looking back on life with cool composure. They were not even the life stories of persons who had already become accomplished writers. Writing the autobiographies made most of them (except Daya Pawar and Shankarrao Kharat) writers. In this sense they were not even 'autobiographies'. They can best be described as 'social epiphanies', expressions of a never before mentioned intensity. Dalit poetry had brought into the realm of Marathi literature the anger of the marginalized and their protest against the establishment. Some excellent short fiction such as the stories by Baburao Bagul contain an explosive depiction of the life of those who are forced to live by concealing their identity. Dalit autobiography brought to Marathi literature a larger canvas for depiction of the social, cultural, and political processes of marginalization. Their inwardness with these processes and the authenticity of their experiences created in Marathi literature a new space and claimed it with an assertive energy.

Limbale

In the initial phase of the Dalit literary movement, the critical response to it was far from literary. First, there was a sense of disbelief. The use of language full of regional varieties was seen as the writer's inability to handle the 'literary' Marathi. The critics found the world of cultural references in Dalit writing confusing, shocking, and lacking in 'cultural' depth. The writing was initially seen with scepticism and even ridiculed. However, Narayan Surve, Namdeo Dhasal, and Daya Pawar had given Marathi poetry a new tone and power; and their acceptance by the little magazine movement—which too had to encounter a pitched resistance from the literary establishment—had made an assured space for Dalit expression in Marathi literature. It was the little magazines that had presented to Marathi, poets like Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre and Bhalchandra Nemade (also a major novelist). Dhasal and Surve quickly came to be perceived as poets on par with these. Hence, when autobiography was discovered as a medium by the Dalit writers in the 1980s, the Marathi-reading public was prepared to receive the works with a sense of sympathetic welcome. Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* appeared in 1984 in this context. By the time Limbale's autobiography

was published, a number of autobiographies by Dalit writers had already been published. It was natural then that Limbale's work had to face the challenge of finding a place among those. However, *Akkarmashi* came to be recognized as a contemporary classic immediately after its publication.

Two years after *Akkarmashi* was published, Limbale wrote in an article entitled 'Chronicle of a Fatherless Being': 'I have sown the events, incidents and experience from my life of twenty-seven years ... This is the story of my life, an expression of my mother's agony and an autobiography of a community. Being fatherless is as much my fate as it is to be in a general ward (in the hospital) of suffering.' (*A. Ba. Ka. Da. I.*, Diwali special no. 1986, p. 152) In the preface to the first print of *Akkarmashi*, he wrote:

> Every time the dominant classes attack and exploit the weak, they violate their women. The sexual exploits of the men among the wicked exploiters draw legitimacy from their authority, wealth, society, culture and religion. But what of the exploited woman? She has to carry the rape in her womb. That rape has to be borne, fed and reared. And this rape acquires and lives a life. My autobiography holds in it the agony of such a life. My experiences are my words. What will remain there if you take experience away from a life? A living corpse.

Limbale's autobiography is a frighteningly candid story of his childhood and growth as an unsired person; and in its power to disturb it compares well with Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* or Jean Genet's *A Thief's Journal*. It has the same intensity of narration that raises the ultimate question in social ethics, namely, 'What at all is morality?' The autobiography concludes with these questions: 'Why has this complex of moral establishment been created at all? Who created morality and immorality? Why? If my birth and life are being branded as immoral, what morality do I follow?' The author knows that there are no answers to these questions. Limbale's autobiography is an intense narrative, pointing to the futility of these questions and the agony and frustration in searching for their answers.

To be a single-parent child may not appear much of a problem to a western reader and even to many Indian readers of this English translation of Limbale's autobiography. Yet, for the community to which he belongs and within the semirural context where he spent his childhood, this

same condition can make life excruciating. The agony was compounded in his case by the abject poverty which forced him and those who brought him up to spend a lifetime thinking of nothing beyond the ways of getting half a plate of gruel for a meal. It is a shattering experience to see in Limbale's graphic depiction of the want and woe, a saintly forgiveness, compassion and detachment. In the life narrative, one finds that whereas the narrator should be boiling with anger, he is meditating on the very fundamental issues related to social relationships and ethics. It is this detachment, and the ability to turn away from the personal, that makes *Akkarmashi* a disturbing life narrative. Frequently, in the middle of the narration of humiliation and hunger, Limbale suddenly assumes the tone of a philosophical questioner trying to unbuild the cosmos:

> Bhakari is as large as man. It is as vast as the sky, and bright like the sun. Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is more vast than the seven circles of hell. Man is only as big as a bhakari, and only as big as his hunger. Hunger is more powerful than man. A single stomach is like the whole earth. Hunger seems no bigger than your open palm, but it can swallow the whole world and let out a belch. There would have been no wars if there was no hunger. What about stealing and fighting? If there was no hunger what would have happened to sin and virtue, heaven and hell, this creation of God? If there was no hunger how could a country, its borders, citizens, parliament, Constitution come into being? The world is born from a stomach, so also the links between mother and father, sister and brother.

This outburst is not of a hungry man bounding for meals; it is more a saint's quest to understand the meaning of the world, which in this case is read in the alphabet of hunger and want.

The most memorable element of Limbale's life story is his attitude to women. There are many women characters in it, and not one of them without a serious complication in her life. There are widows, childless women, deserted women, and as the ultimate of all this divine and social injustice, Limbale presents his own mother who has been cheated again and again, exploited most blatantly in every relationship she strikes, burdened with a roll call of children and their upbringing. The author however shows a remarkable understanding of their situation. There is no cursing or blaming them in his narrative, there is not even a tone of

pity for them in it. He has learnt to accept their plight in life as such. It is this depth of his response that makes Limbale's *Akkarmashi* stand out in the genre of Dalit autobiography. And it is for the same reason, that this philosophically potent and poetically powerful narrative makes the readers introspect deeply, which is what all great literary works must do.

G.N. Devy

One day, all the boys and girls from our school were going on a picnic, but we, the Mahar boys, did not know this, and so had come to school as usual, our school bags on our backs. Then our teacher asked us also to go back and get our tiffin. Excited at the thought of being out of school, we ran home like oxen in a race on the Ker day.

We returned with our jowar bhakari and chutney tied up in dirty rags, and joined the group of boys and girls who were standing in rows. Just then Bhiwarabai appeared, gripping the stalk of a dry jowar plant. Roughly she pulled Parshya from his row, making him cry. Bhiwarabai dragged him off. Parshya wanted to go on the picnic with us but Bhiwarabai wouldn't let him.

'Parshya, follow me or I'll kick you. Your father has left to dig pits without eating anything. You must take his food to him or he will starve the whole day. He will chop you to pieces when he returns. Come along.' Bhiwarabai was very annoyed at Parshya and she lashed his back, abusing him.

It felt strange to be moving with all the teachers, boys and girls in a single group. Women, gathering dry dung-cakes, watched us, admiringly. We were excited. Harya, who was grazing cattle along the banks of the stream, looked restless. His father had taken him away from school and put him to work, grazing cattle. Harya was employed on Girmallya's farm. For his hard work he received food and a hundred rupees a year. Harya's mother didn't even have proper clothes. Most of the time, everyone

in his house was only half-fed. Now that Harya had started working he was no longer a burden, but an asset to the family. The question of his bread was solved. There would be his pay at the end of every year. Clothes could be bought now for everyone in the house with that money. As we all passed by in rows, Harya, astride a buffalo, was singing.

The tough boys of the group went up the trees and the other boys and girls ran about all over the place. The girls played phugadi; their teachers, card-games. There was great fun and excitement. Too young to participate, I merely watched them from a distance, admiring them as those dung-gathering women had admired us.

The Wani and Brahmin boys played kabbadi. Being marked as Mahars we couldn't join them. So Mallya, Umbrya, Parshya, all from my caste, began to play touch-and-go. We played one kind of game while the high-caste village boys played another. The two games were played separately like two separate whirlwinds.

Play over, we settled down to eat. Boys and girls from the high castes like Wani, Brahmin, Marwari, Muslim, Maratha, Teli, fishermen, goldsmiths and all the teachers, about hundred or so sat in a circle under a banyan tree. We, the Mahar boys and girls, were asked to sit under another tree. The high-caste ones said a prayer before eating, which didn't make any sense to us.

Parshya didn't even have a piece of cloth to tie up his food in, so his bhakaris were tied with mine. Mallya had brought bombil fish. Umbrya had brought only bhakari and no chutney. We opened our bundles. The high-caste children offered their food to our teachers. Theirs was a variety of fried and tasty food.

Even the tree we sat under was tattered like us. Whenever the wind shook its branches it produced waves of hot air that hit our faces. We sat in its broken shadow. Mallya offered us his bombil curry and, in exchange, we offered him our dry bhakari as he had not brought any. Dare I offer my chutney-bhakari to my teacher? Would he eat it? Bhakaris of the high caste were of course of a better quality. Their mothers had given them fried food, whereas we had just pieces of dry bhakaris which were hardly enough to satisfy the cave of hunger.

My stomach was like a way to the graveyard that continuously swallows the dead. My mother Masamai used to shout angrily, 'What is it you

have, a stomach or Akkalkot? There seems to be a gizzard in your stomach. Why don't you go around with a big bowl at your mouth?' I always felt half-fed. Whatever was given I ate greedily and nothing was ever enough. Everyone in my house needed food so how could I alone think of eating till I was full? I had searched for every bit of leftover food in the house to make up my tiffin. I felt I had swallowed the whole land and was chewing stones.

The high-caste girls from our village offered us their curry and bhakaris without touching us. The thought that they might have seen our food upset me. I was ashamed of my food and felt guilty eating it.

The high-caste boys and girls from the village were eating together. The girls sat close to the teachers. They were all chatting and we sat like owls watching them. We had before us only the crumbs of bombil. With each morsel, I chewed the lips of the laughing girls. At last we finished eating.

The teacher asked the high-caste boys and girls to collect the leftovers on a piece of paper and give it to us. I and Parshya carried the bundle of leftover food on the way back. The high-caste boys and girls were laughing and joking, but our whole attention was on the bundle. Mallya carried a bundle of bhakari on his head and we, the Mahar boys, followed him excitedly like hungry vultures. At last we gathered in Girmallya's farm and opened the bundle. It contained crumbs of different kinds of food and their spicy smell filled the air. We squatted in a circle and stuffed ourselves greedily. We had never tasted food like that before. We were all really gluttonous. Our stomachs were as greedy as a beggar's sack.

When I got home I told my mother all this. Like the victim of a famine she said, 'Why didn't you get at least a small portion of it for me? Leftover food is nectar.' Her words made Girmallya's farm quiver in my stomach.

When I went to school the next day, the teacher had already asked the boys and girls to write an essay on the picnic. The students of the seventh form in particular were busy writing the essay. Although I was only in the third form, the teacher had asked us also to write. Both the classes were run in the same room. While the senior boys and girls wrote swiftly, I sat worrying.

When the teacher noticed me, apparently doing nothing, he grew

annoyed and shouted, 'You, son of a bitch, come on, start writing! You like eating an ox, don't you?' I picked up my slate and pencil, spat on the slate, smeared it and wiped the slate with my shirt which was already dirty having been used like this so many times before. I didn't know how and what to write. I kept thinking of how we had squatted in a circle under a tree in the forest, eating. I remembered the hands of high-caste boys and girls offering us their leftovers, the withered tree in whose shade we sat, the bundle of leftovers, the question my mother had asked, and the teacher calling me a son of a bitch and a beef-eater. How should I start writing the essay my teacher had asked for?

Our school where the pupils came from high castes like Wani and Brahmin, was run in the temple of Ithoba. The girls sat in a separate section. Further down the temple hall sat boys and girls from the cobbler community, and then at the entrance sat we, the Mahar boys and girls. Arjya, a Mang, never sat with us. On Saturdays the teacher asked us to smear the floor and walls with cowdung paste. The teacher had a particular admiration for me because I was an expert in gathering dung and smearing it evenly. At home I wouldn't do even the smallest chore, but in the school on Saturdays I was made to do this duty that was allotted to me. A man from my community had to carry out such duties in the village for the high-caste people.

One day while sweeping, I reached the middle of the temple entirely unaware that I had. Of course I was happy at the thought that I had entered the temple, though not consciously. The next moment I was afraid that someone might see me there. With the onset of the rains in the month of Shrawan the school was moved to some other place. I still remember how Parshya once pissed on the sacred icon of the Bhutalsidh temple. Parshya was a very bitter boy. God will punish Parshya, he will lose his job. That rascal had recklessly pissed on God. I was scared. I made the gesture seeking forgiveness by touching my right cheek with my left palm and the left cheek with the right palm.

Though branded as untouchables we too are Hindus by faith. We too are human beings. High-caste children from the village may visit the

temple, yet we are forbidden. There is a saying, 'Children are the flowers of God's abode,' but not us. We are the garbage the village throws out. There were so many caste factions in our school. The umbilical cord between our locality and the village had snapped, as if the village, torn asunder, had thrown us out of it. We had grown up like aliens since our infancy. This sense of alienation increased over the years and to this day my awful childhood haunts me.

Sometimes, because it was the month of rains, our school would be moved to Shivappa Teli's mansion. The first time I went there, I sat with the other boys, but Mahadya, a servant in the mansion, noticed me. Running up to me he snatched my school bag and slapped me. I felt dazed. I choked on my sobs. The other boys and girls watched the scene. Then the teacher appeared and saved me by accommodating me at the entrance. I sat there burning with rage.

Whenever the school was held in the Marwari's mansion, we Mahar boys had to sit on the floor whereas the other boys sat on a raised platform. In the drawing room, adjoining the entrance door, the teacher taught mathematics. We sat amidst the footwear flung all around us. Babali's chappals were beautiful. I never touched my teacher's chappals as I was afraid of tainting their sanctity. To me his chappals were like Rama's sandals.

I was used to filthy children in the Maharwada. We hardly knew what a village actually meant as we played and grew up only in the Maharwada. Heaps of garbage, tin sheds, dogs, and pigs were our only companions. We spent most of our time on Jaganath Patil's garbage, playing, where we found bits of waste paper and sandals.

When I first saw our school, it was crammed with children. For the first time I saw a chair, a blackboard, a cane, and a teacher. Most of all I admired my teacher's umbrella. My schooling started in the real sense from the third form onward. The teacher promoted me in the first two forms because my name happened to be listed in the attendance record. At that stage of my life I didn't understand much. Whenever the teacher visited my house to take me to school I used to hide or run away to the fields. I, Parshya, and Umbrya from the upper lane of our Maharwada were truant boys. We had a strong desire to tease the teacher whenever

we saw him. We used to shout, 'Master, Master tu kewda? Pora palali dhar lawda.' (Teacher, Teacher how big you are? The boys have run away so hold your cock.) Saying which we ran away.

I went to school on the first day with boys of the same age. I sat with Mallya and Parshya. Everybody's place was more or less fixed.

I felt an urgent need to piss, but how could I tell the teacher who was seated far away from me? I was scared to even talk to him. I didn't know that I had to raise my little finger and seek the teacher's attention for permission to leave the room. A flood of piss flowed out of my shorts. The boys made a great noise over it. I turned pale with shame and fear. The teacher drove me out of the class and I had to go home in my wet shorts. I stayed away from school for the next two days.

Shorts then meant what I now use as underwear. I used such shorts—more rags than shorts—till my seventh form. My mother used to patch them up to keep them intact. Whenever my bottom showed through, to cover up I wrapped a towel around my waist.

During the short interval the other boys threw stones at me and teased me calling aloud 'Mahar!'. That made me anxious. One day a group of boys crowded around me like a whirlwind. Mallya had already escaped. One after another they advanced towards me like charging bulls. I felt suffocated. It was like the sky pressing down on me. Ramya Jalkote hit me in the face. My mouth opened, gasping for breath. After that the boys ran away. For many days after this event, whenever I saw him Ramya Jalkote, I was scared.

There were morning processions on Independence Day and Republic Day. Most of the boys wore their uniforms but I just tucked my shirt into my shorts. The procession only went around the village. I wished it would pass through our Maharwada, so that other boys from our locality would see me in the procession. My granny looked proudly on when she saw me shouting the slogans. She must have felt her dream had come true. My granny's name is Santamai and it was she who brought me up.

Santamai was busy sweeping the village streets. I shouted the slogans louder when I saw her. She smiled when she saw me and started sweeping more vigorously. She normally kissed me when I returned home. Her

mouth smelt foul and her teeth had turned quite black from the herbal powder she used to clean them with.

After school we used to go to the river and sit on the sands to eat. Then we went swimming. The high-caste villagers filled their water pots and their women washed their clothes upstream. Downstream the kunbies and shepherds collected water in their vessels and carried them off. They also washed their clothes and bathed. Those who looked after the grazing cattle washed their buffaloes and bathed themselves. The water at the lowest end was meant for us.

I used to stand in the river, collect water in my cupped palms and drink it. One day some mother had washed her baby's clothes that sent a lump of shit floating towards me. But is there anything purer than water? The water flowing down from up the river had already entered my stomach. I felt sick.

When there was the occasional wedding in the prestigious village families we grew as excited as wolves. The entire village was invited to the feast. In the end even the Maharwada was also invited.

During such weddings, which continued for a few days, we lingered near the house where it took place. A colourful tent was a rare sight. We could hear loudspeakers. Women and girls arrived laden with jewellery. The aroma of mouth-watering delicacies filled the air. We small children hung about inside the tent and danced to the band music. Some elderly villager or other would get annoyed and drive us away. We ran hard, but sneaked back again after some time.

A wedding generally got under way with high excitement and some commotion. It was an event to display one's affluence. Guests were invited to the feast. Outside, we swallowed our own saliva. Before beginning to eat they uttered the names of gods like Pundalik and Vithal, and also the names of saints like Jnanadev and Tukaram. We greedily heard the sound of mashed food being slurped. 'Has everyone had enough?' asked some older men. 'Don't hesitate, eat slowly, have as much as you like,' they shouted. Men rushed between the rows, serving diners who were busy eating. There were shouts of 'Kheer!' Someone would announce loudly, 'Chapati! Ghee! Curry!' A flock of crows fluttered in our stomachs. Throughout the feast the names of food items being

called aloud assaulted our ears. Our stomachs entered our ears, they became the feast, they became a huge cauldron.

God endowed man with a stomach. So man began to enjoy eating and drinking. At the wedding feast there was so much to eat and drink that it made choosing difficult. After all you have only one stomach, so you get confused. Man thought if God has given me so much to eat why then has He given me just one stomach? Man then went to God and said, 'Oh God, you made a mistake by giving me just one stomach. I want to eat and drink a great deal, it will be a blessing if you give me two stomachs.' God replied, 'Oh Man, go away. First try filling this one stomach and then come back to me. I will certainly give you one more.'

Since then man has been striving to satisfy his stomach. Filling even one stomach proved difficult for him. He began to live with a half-filled one. He survived by swallowing his own saliva. He went for days without eating anything. He started selling himself for his stomach. A woman becomes a whore and a man a thief. The stomach makes you clean shit, it even makes you eat shit.

I realized that God had made a mistake by endowing man with a stomach. I stood waiting, my stomach in my hands, near the house where the wedding was in progress. All of us from the Maharwada were hoping and waiting for an invitation to the feast.

At last, a servant from the house where the wedding was going on arrived with an invitation. 'Come to the feast,' he announced loudly to all of us and the entire Maharwada rushed to the feast. Our clay stoves were not lit on such days. Not even the tiniest living creature stayed behind. The feast started with the women and children eating first. It was as though a procession was moving towards the house where the wedding was taking place. Masamai never attended such feasts. I went with Santamai. My sister Nagi too came along. As I had no father I had to follow somebody. I always hid my plate under my shirt.

They served kheer in our plates. Very young children were given only a small portion. I ate greedily as soon as I was served and emptied my plate. I asked for many more helpings. As Masamai was alone at home and hungry I thought of sneaking this delicacy to her. I asked for more

and more kheer though my stomach was full and walked back home with it. I was very happy at what I was doing. But Girmallya happened to notice me. He snatched my plate full of kheer, threw it on the ground, and slapped me in the face. 'Son of a bitch,' he shouted, 'if you didn't want it why the hell did you take it? Don't let me see you more than once at any feast after this. The scum! They eat as much as they want and still crave for more to take home.' I returned home crying. Girmallya didn't allow anyone to sneak the kheer away. That included my sister too.

I returned home with my empty plate but Santamai had managed to sneak some kheer away. We ate it in the evening, by which time it had gone sour. Santamai boiled it with water and jaggery and when it was served we slurped it up.

Sometimes Santamai used to smear a wedding house with dung-paste, for which she was given some kheer which she brought home for us. We used to dry the kheer in the sun and make small lumps of it. Whenever we were hungry we chewed those lumps like tamarind pips.

Once, after a village feast when Santamai and my sisters returned home, I asked for the kheer they had sneaked out. Masamai said, 'Take your plate and go.' But I refused as I felt awkward about going to the village just to eat. If my schoolmates saw me, would they tease me? On the way to the village there were the houses of girls from my school. Whenever I passed along that road I felt like a thief, and was filled with self-loathing. Masamai used to force me to go, calling me names, pushing a plate into my hand and driving me away. 'Do you want me to feed you with dust—there is nothing else in this house. You are not yet old enough to go digging to earn a living. Get out. Come back only after eating at the feast. You have too much of self-respect. From where should I produce food for you? Go and find out if anyone would like to buy me in the market! You won't be happy until you swallow me!'

I walked away quietly, the plate under my shirt. I wondered if I could sell Masamai like junk in exchange for salted gram. At the feast I ate only whatever I was served and didn't ask for more. It was strange that at the feast they gave us food but no water. We could drink water only after returning home. When I reached home Masamai was very

angry. 'Why didn't you save some kheer and bring it home?' she shouted. I stood still like an unwashed plate.

Often I accompanied Santamai while she gathered dung. I walked in front, like a police dog, and my grandmother followed me. Like a ghost riding her, she carried a sack on her back to put the dung in. With broken chappals on, she dragged her feet as she walked. We looked around everywhere for lumps of dung, and were very happy when we found any. We made round cakes of dung, dried them and sold them. This helped a little to appease the fire of hunger in our stomachs.

During the harvest when cattle grazed in the fields, they passed undigested grains of jowar in their dung. The grains were yellow and swollen. Santamai picked up such lumps of dung and on the way home washed the dung in the river water, collecting only the clean grains.

She then dried them in the sun. As they dried they shrank. I felt the grains should not be washed as washing shrank them back. We went home when the grains were dry. When Santamai came home she ground the jowar grains into flour. Santamai always sang while she ground grain.

Santamai's melodious singing and the rough sound of grinding mingled. With dusk came the time for lighting lamps. A small lamp without kerosene burned like a consumptive. Mice disappeared, afraid of the light. The dog lay at the entrance like a washed cloth wrung out. Dada arrived and sat in the corner smoking bidies and coughing in between, intermittently muttering 'Allah, Maulah' . His eyes, like sugar cane twisted by a crusher, kept watching me. I asked Dada to tell me a story, and in return he asked me to massage his legs. Dada began his story, 'Once there was a sparrow and a crow ...'

Santamai would get up after grinding the jowar. As she roamed the fields and open lands, suffering from constant exposure to the sun, her skin was wizened and dry. Suppressing hunger had become a habit with her. She stuffed the clay stove with rags, haystalks, dry leaves, and twigs. She gave me a rag and asked me to fetch fire from Masamai's house. I brought the fire as it licked the rags. Santamai kindled the fire in the clay stove, blowing on it without a blowpipe. At first there was only smoke, and then the rags caught fire. Perspiring, Santamai looked like

a blacksmith in the light of the stove's fire. The clay stove burned like my head. The entire house was full of smoke. Insects fled like outlaws, though at other times they filled the house with their shrill humming.

Dada continued with his story. It helped pass the time while food was being cooked. Santamai made bhakaris which we ate, squatting. Santamai herself ate the bhakari made from the jowar collected from the dung, but for us she made bhakaris from the flour she had collected as alms. The bhakaris made from the jowar picked out of the dung looked coarse but spicy. She normally refused to give them to me but on that day I quarrelled and demanded some. I put a piece in my mouth and chewed it slowly. It stank of dung. As I chewed it, I felt I was actually eating dung. It was difficult for me to swallow it. Somehow forcing myself to gulp it down, I returned the remaining bhakari to Santamai.

Santamai was used to eating such bhakari. It was like pushing garbage into a furnace, feeding its fire. Santamai ate those bhakaris as a matter of course, her blackened teeth turning those bhakaris into pulp. Santamai's mouth seemed to be a boiler. I was confused because Santamai showed no sign of nausea after eating such bhakaris. She gave no sign of being assaulted by the stink of dung. She just pushed it into her mouth, and it went down her stomach, whereas the dung heaved up in mine.

Once a woman from the village dropped a tin of flour she was carrying. The woman collected the upper layer of the scattered flour, discarding the rest. Dada and I lingered there for quite some time. At last Dada walked away and stood at a distance, watching, while I carefully scraped up the remaining flour, trying to avoid the soil on which it lay. I took the flour home, sieved it, put it in an aluminium vessel and closed it with a lid. That evening Dada showed the vessel of flour to Santamai as if it were the moon at Id. Santamai embraced and kissed me fondly. Her mouth, as usual, stank of tobacco. I tried vainly to escape from her grip.

Even to this day I clearly remember an event about which neither Dada nor Santamai had told me. I was wandering idly and alone through the village when a funeral procession approached from the opposite direction. I thought of running away as I was always scared that a ghost might haunt me. What if I dreamt of that corpse, or if it sat on my chest?

But I found I was trapped and there was no way to escape. Rambaap was blowing the horn. Jenthigya was beating a drum. Crackers were burst at the head of the procession and at the rear women followed, weeping. The dead body drew closer and closer to me. Coins were hurled at it. The smell of eucalyptus oil was in the air. I felt afraid. A five-paisa coin came rolling my way. I picked it up quickly, though I was nervous about taking such money. I looked around to make sure that I had not been observed. The thought of more money tempted me to join the procession. Umbrya and Parshya too were part of the crowd.

On the way to the cremation ground, according to custom they placed the corpse on the ground for a rest. People scattered for a while. Rambaap lit his bidi. Jenthigya asked me slyly, 'How much money have you found?' I too whispered, 'Ten paise.' Once again, after a short rest and change of shoulders on which the bier was carried, the procession continued on its way. Rambaap blew the horn. Jenthigya's fingers played the march for the dead on the drum.

As was the custom, a handful of jowar and some coins were left at the spot where the body had been placed temporarily. I was tempted by the mound of jowar that had been left there. I didn't follow the procession. I picked up the jowar and ran home like the wind, calculating how many times Santamai would kiss me and also wishing that rich people would die every day.

When I reached home Santamai was patching old clothes. The moment she saw me she took off her chappals and threw them at me. Somebody had told her that I had touched the things connected with the body, and she was very angry about it. I began to cry. She shouted, 'Go and throw that jowar from the corpse into the river.'

I went back to the river. Jenthigya and Rambaap were approaching in wet clothes. Those who had joined the funeral procession were returning, including Ramya Jalkote. He had touched the dead body and so was not supposed to touch anyone or anything till he went home and had a purificatory bath. He shrank as he saw me, not wanting any contact.

Maharwada meant a heap of jowar grains gathered at the resting place of a corpse. Each person was like a grain. Why don't they too eat the jowar connected with the rites for the dead? It too was food. Why

should such jowar not be touched? If eaten, it would at least fill the stomach. If sowed there would be a whole crop of it.

On Pola day, work was allotted to different people on a contract basis for the year to come. Mostly odd or sundry jobs were contracted out. Our caste council appointed Mahar labourers for such jobs and were paid with grain in return. The entire Maharwada would gather at the community hall on this occasion. With everybody's consent the honour was given to selected families. By turn, every family got a chance to run this contract. Even someone from the lower lane of the Maharwada was given this opportunity, but it was refused utterly to those from the lane of lice, as they were the filthiest and not even considered natives. Even single men and women were given such contracts and if there happened to be only one old woman in a family, even she had to accept the contract.

Those who accepted contracts got some returns for their labour. Some received six measures of jowar, others got four, yet others might receive only two. Occasional tips were a different matter. If there was no male in the family, the woman from such a family sub-contracted it to someone else on a share basis. For a fifty per cent share anybody was prepared to accept the contract.

The contract involved doing odd jobs for the Maharwada. In addition to the allotted work, the contract involved smearing the community hall with dung paste from time to time and lighting the village street lamps every evening. If a calf died in the village one had to drag it away, skin it, and sell the skin. For such a job the owner of the dead animal would give eight measures of jowar. Then everyone had a share in it and it helped to satisfy our hunger in a small way.

At night the entire Maharwada gathered at the community hall to sleep. The hall was large enough to accommodate everyone. Old people told stories from their past, which made the nights interesting. While telling them these elderly people became intoxicated with their bidies and tobacco. The narrator occasionally had a bout of coughing and looked drained. The sight of a sleeping boy fondling himself in a corner would disturb him. Some cuckold put the lamp off at midnight and

crept into the bed of a young boy. Smoke had made the niche where the lamp burned terribly sooty. Crushed bugs made the walls look as though some paan-chewer had spat on them. The broom in the corner looked like a widow who practised witchcraft. The open space in front of the community hall was wet and sticky because that was where people pissed at night. There were holes in the ground where boys had played marbles. The huge cauldron balanced against the community hall had witnessed many events of the Maharwada. The Mariai temple squatted like a moneylender opposite the community hall. The old tamarind tree, with its nests of crows and kites, provided a huge shade and on it also hung the carcass of some animal left there to dry.

Whenever an animal died in the village, its owner came to the Maharwada to ask the one under contract to remove the carcass after which three people would accompany the one who had the contract to fetch the dead animal. If the animal was young it was slung on the shoulders and brought to the Maharwada. If it was a big cow or a buffalo it was brought in a cart. Two people pulled the cart and two others pushed it.

Hindus see the cow as their mother. A human mother is cremated, but when a cow dies they need a Mahar to dispose it of. The owner weeps when one of her animals dies. The cow-pen looks sad. The owner has to give a certain measure of grain to the Mahar who takes the dead animal away.

In a month when many animals died, we had enough to appease our hunger. But a month in which no animals died passed with great difficulty, like the intercalary month. At such times an animal was usually poisoned to death. Mankunna and Pralhadbaap went to a distant village to steal a buffalo and we spent the whole night slaughtering and cutting up the animal. In the morning, meat was cooked in every house.

When we were young, the sight of a dead animal excited us. We would draw closer when they started skinning it. To avoid commotion we were driven away. As a tough boy I was always asked to help in small ways. I used to hold the legs. Men peeled the skin off with knives. My hands would be sticky with blood and flesh. The legs I held slipped from my grip, so I was scolded. Then I had to grip them harder. I used to watch closely the things I had heard about in school—liver, intestines,

lungs, heart, spleen, everything. Dogs would hover on the fringes of the gathering and a boy was appointed to throw stones at them to drive them away.

Everyone in the Maharwada appeared, one after another, bringing their vessels or plates with them. They almost leapt on the slaughtered animal to get their share. The one with the contract, who had fetched the dead animal, had the right to the first share and he always chose the best part of the meat. Others took away the remaining parts like the heart, spleen, intestines, and legs. Whatever was left, was devoured by dogs who fought each other, barking. I used to take a chunk of meat with which to cure my drum, wash it clean in the river, fasten it with thread to the edge of a sieve, and waited till the meat dried. I guarded my drum from dogs and cats, who came, drawn by the smell of the meat I had used on it. At night while eating my dinner, my hands still smelt of raw flesh.

When animals died the white vultures arrived. When an animal's connecting cord with heaven was severed, it died. The vultures sensed that the cord was about to snap. Huge, black and white vultures arrived. People scared us, saying, 'Vultures will peck your nose out.'

As children we played a game in which one of us pretended to be a dead animal. The others, about ten or twelve of us, played the role of vultures. The biggest child was the sharp and long-nosed golden vulture. Our playmates included a Mang boy who also was a 'vulture', but who, even as we played, kept his distance as he was not supposed to mix with us. We poked and prodded the boy who was the 'dead animal', and screeched like vultures.

The skeleton of a dead animal lay rotting for many days. Ribs, the jaw, eye-sockets, horns, teeth, legs, everything looked so gruesome. In school we were once shown a human skeleton which looked far more horrifying.

When I was in the seventh form, Maula Jamadar's young ox died. Its flesh tasted so fresh. The Mahars didn't waste even the smallest piece. They cleared off everything and not even the smallest bit fell to the ground. Pieces of its flesh that hung drying in every hut looked like buntings.

One day, soon after this, when I reached school, Ismillya, Maula's son, was teasing Umbrya calling him 'a base born'. As I reached there he

said, 'Here's another base born who swallowed our ox.' The girls were listening with great interest. I ran away, the ox dashing against the insides of my stomach.

My great granny, Chandamai, usually woke me in the morning with a call that was actually a scream. I would rise quickly, even when Santamai and Dada were still asleep. Chandamai would be up very early in the morning making black tea, using jaggery to sweeten it. When the tea was ready she called me. I drank my first tea of the day without rinsing my mouth. Until I was ten or twelve years old I never carried water to wash my bottom; I used to do so in the river. I also bathed in the river. I had no soap so I scrubbed my body with a piece of stone, and scrubbed my clothes with mud to clean them.

After my first cup of tea I would crawl between Santamai and Dada, and fall asleep again. Before I woke up, Dada and Santamai would already have left for work. After waking up again, I would go to Masamai to drink tea along with my sisters, Nagi and Nirmi. Chandamai made tea for the second time but this time added milk to it.

It was Santamai's practice to make tea only after she returned from sweeping the village streets. She gave us a lot of tea in our plates. If I had already left for school she saved it for me. During the interval I would rush home and eat bhakari soaked in tea. Sometimes Santamai brought tea to school in a round vessel and called me out to give it to me.

When I returned from school, I ate roasted dry meat that Chandamai prepared for me. She always preserved pieces of meat which she placed on the water troughs on the roof to dry. Flies buzzed about the chunks of meat like bees around a honeycomb. Every now and then, whenever they were disturbed, a cloud of flies would rise from the pieces. The cat in Chandamai's house crouched by me, following me everywhere. I tried to chase it away but it was stubborn. Chandamai then hit it with a blowpipe to drive it away. This cat used to scratch the floor and dirty that spot. I still remember that nauseating smell.

Chandamai would select a few pieces of dry meat, cut them into smaller pieces with a sickle and roast them on a hot pan which melted

the fat in the meat, causing it to sizzle. The smell of frying meat spread all over the house. Chandamai used to roast crumbs of stale bhakari in the same pan, with a spoon, then taking the pan off the flames, add salt and chilli. She would then place the whole hot pan before me. The bhakari, fried in melted fat, was very tasty. I ate quickly, relishing the taste. When there was no meat, Chandamai used to fry bhakari in the fat she kept in a small clay pot whose mouth was sealed with a piece of cloth. She stored the fat after boiling bits of it and allowing it to settle into a single hard lump.

Chandamai liked roasted peanuts. She used to collect peanuts from many people and particularly enjoyed eating them with jaggery. She saved peanuts, which she kept sealed in clay pots till the rainy season when she broke those clay pots and ate the stored peanuts. Dattumama from Chungi used to bring meat, peanuts, and chillies for Chandamai.

Chandamai and Santamai were blood sisters. They were six sisters with just one brother among them. The other sisters were Dhonda, Ganga, Revbai, and Ahilya. Chandamai was married to a man from Barhanpur. Santamai was married in Teerth, Dhondamai in Chungi, Gangamai in Walsang, Revbai in Waagdari, and Ahilya in Shirwal. Laxman, their only brother, had married six times but had no child. Chandamai's and Santamai's marriages were failures because Chandamai was barren and Santamai had borne only a daughter. Santamai went away with her daughter, Masamai, to live in Hanoor, her home before marriage. Their mother's name was Bhagumai, their father's Satubaap. Satu Mahar was a labourer.

Dattumama, Dhonda's eldest son, who visited Chandamai frequently, was a thief who stole chillies, onions, and peanuts from fields. He came to Chandamai in the early mornings with a sackful of whatever he had stolen. Chandamai was very fond of Dattumama. And they always opened the sack together. Sometimes it would be filled with just meat and nothing else. Whenever Chandamai asked Dattumama to bring her some meat, he would poison an animal to death and send her a whole sackful of meat.

Dattumama had a brother whose name was Rohidas. He never visited us, because he had eloped with a woman from our Maharwada, and the Maharwada was against him.

The news early one morning was that Dhondamai was dead. Chandamai and Santamai returned after attending the cremation. Chandamai wept a lot, sobbing and recalling memories. She said, 'That rascal Dattya has strangled my sister to death.' But how and why would Dattumama kill his own mother? To this day I haven't been able to work it out. Of the sisters, today Santamai and Chandamai are the only survivors rather like a pair of a goat's teats.

Most of the time Chandamai and Santamai were openly affectionate towards one another, but occasionally they quarrelled violently. At such times it seemed as if one might even kill the other. They fought physically, one sitting on the other and each tearing the other's hair out. Chandamai was a tough and wily creature. She never allowed anyone to touch even the smallest thing that belonged to her, not even handle the lump of dung that might be lying in front of her house. Masamai and Chandamai also often quarrelled and abused each other violently. Nagi and Masamai used to attack Chandamai together, making her yell and cry so loudly that people gathered round to watch the spectacle. Masamai had a few fowls, while Chandamai owned a cat, which was always stalking Masamai's chickens. Nagi once hit the cat, and Chandamai in turn abused her. Sometimes Masamai tried to interfere, shouting, 'Why don't you tie up your cat? It eats up our chicken.' Masamai and Chandamai didn't talk to each other for a few days after the quarrel. Chandamai, angry with her cat, tied it to the leg of the old bed on which she slept. She was very fond of the cat. Later, when Masamai and Chandamai made up, we took the cat away and left it on the other side of the river. Chandamai gave me ten paise as a tip for the job while warning me, 'Never kill a cat. It is a sin, you will have to visit Kashi to wash your sins away.'

When Nagi and I returned after leaving the cat on the other side of the river, Chandamai called me indoors. Her eyes full of tears, she kept asking worriedly about her pet. 'Have you killed the cat? Where did you leave her? Was she crying?' I said nothing in reply. Without the cat both Chandamai and her house looked gloomy.

After a few days Chandamai brought another kitten from somewhere which she kept indoors, rocking it in her arms like a baby the whole day. When the kitten grew up we took it to the other side of the river.

Whenever the wadaars visited our village, Chandamai hid the cat in her house, tying her up because she feared wadaars, who were known to eat cats.

I developed an aversion to dead animals and detested those who ate their flesh. This hatred spread like an epidemic among our gang of boys. Whenever an animal was being skinned we deliberately went there and grabbed its legs. When it was skinned we pissed on it, threw soil and dung on it so that no one would eat the meat. Even so Keramai used to carry off the meat, and wash and cook it. We felt that no one should eat the meat of a dead animal.

Santamai was very bitter and angry with us because we played everywhere. She did not like our touching things in the house, because, she said, a ghost could follow our footsteps. She took many precautions because Masamai had had a child recently. The baby's head was not yet tonsured and Satwai is considered inauspicious.

She had many complaints about us and criticized us constantly. She could not bear to be touched without reason. She asked us to spit before entering the house, nor could we enter the house without washing our feet and she sprinkled cow's urine on us as soon as we entered it. It was our duty to go around looking for and collecting cow's urine. We followed cows for their urine with a vessel. But they never urinated when we needed the urine. The vessel would hardly fill up. I felt like pissing in it myself to make it full, but Nagi was with me. She might notice it and make a great fuss. I would be quite annoyed. There were so many oxen around, but an ox's urine was not permitted. Cow's urine alone had the power to transform anything unholy and purify it. We used to tease a cow's vagina to make her urinate, always with some success, and carried home the vessel containing whatever quantity of urine we had colleted.

I remember Santamai forcing me to gargle with the urine. It was nauseating. My mouth felt it would crack at the bitterness of the urine. Santamai tried to convince me that if I drank cow's urine I would never be ill. This annoyed me but she made even Nagi drink it.

Once, in summer, as usual I was playing with Arjya, a Mang. Thirsty,

we entered my house and I drank water first before giving the cup to Arjya. Santamai shouted, 'Why do you play with that boy? Is there no one else in the whole village to play with? Don't give him water in that vessel. If he touches it, he'll defile it. Go away.' I was upset because I couldn't give water to a friend. Is one's caste more important than one's friend? Is caste more important than thirst? Wasn't Arjya a human being? If so, how could he make water impure by merely touching it?

Arjya and I kept walking towards the river. The ground was too hot to walk on, and we felt as if our hearts were being roasted. Different parts of the river bank were reserved for Mahars and Mangs. Where were we to drink water from? Even water was its own enemy here. Our minds were divided like separate reservoirs of water. No, our minds were not only divided they were also contaminated.

Arjya and I drank water from the reservoir meant for the Mangs. When I reached home Santamai hit me because I had drunk the water meant for the Mangs. Ansamai too hit Arjya, because by allowing me to drink water from the reservoir for Mangs he was responsible for contaminating it. 'If you play any more with the Mang boys, I will stop feeding you. You can then go to Mangwada. Are you born from the seed of a Mang that you keep their company? You are the son of a village head. You must eat and play like a prince. You are the son of a Patil ...' Santamai went on shouting at me.

Wednesday was market day in our village. Every Wednesday Dada gave me ten paise and with that money I went around the market from morning till evening. Some people ate chiwda, others bananas, or jalebi. I just kept looking at my ten paise and swallowed my saliva. At the end of the day the market dispersed. I bought a pedha, but ate only a small piece of it like Shabari. I brought home the remaining pedha for my mother, who had just had a baby. She ate the pedha quickly. I said to her, 'Give some pedha to the baby.' My mother replied, 'The baby will get it through my milk.' I then kissed the baby.

My eldest sister Nagi was a born thief. Next to Nagi was Nirmi. I used to tease Nagi calling her a 'mare' and Nirmi 'flat-nosed'. Vani I called 'blacky' and Sooni 'the lame one'. Next to Sooni was Pami, and then

Tamma. Tamma's real name was Shrikant. After Shrikant came Indira whom I called 'the blind one'. Last of all was Sidramma.

Those were the days when we starved. Sometimes we got a little to eat, but most of the time almost nothing. I used to be very hungry and constantly cried for bhakari. I couldn't bear my hunger. I needed only half of a bhakari for which I made such a fuss. At such times Santamai had to go round the village and beg for bhakari, leaving me restless until she came back.

Santamai brought the bhakari hidden in the pouch of her sari. I almost burst with joy and excitement. Santamai returned home very slowly when I wanted her to run back. Santamai emptied the pouch of her sari before me. Some women from the village had given her leftover food. There were many things there and my mouth watered at the sight of food. I ate like a glutton. To us food was like nectar.

Starvation was written in our lot from the moment of our birth. Most of the time all my sisters went to sleep without eating anything. Nobody woke them up for dinner, because there was nothing to eat. I at least ate something. Mother gulped only water. Dada satisfied his hunger by smoking bidies. At the sight of my sisters who had gone to sleep hungry, I lost my appetite and couldn't sleep. I felt like giving a portion of my food to my sisters.

On Wednesday, market day, Vani, Nagi, and Nirmi used to run about everywhere in the market. Not once did they come home. They went around begging and eating whatever they could get. Most of what Nagi and Nirmi used to steal from the market were eatables. In the evening everything they had gathered was pooled and we shared it. We knew we shouldn't steal, but then how could we feed ourselves? Who steals out of habit? The poor steal for the sake of hunger. If they had enough to eat would they steal? Black-marketeers become leaders, whereas those who are driven to steal by hunger are considered criminals.

On one occasion a fruit vendor hit Vani with his chappal in the crowded market. Vani wriggled and cried on the street. She had stolen just a banana but the fruit vendor was wild with anger. Perhaps that fruit vendor had a daughter like Vani? Yet he was ruthless. People gathered at the scene. My eyes flowed like a leaking roof.

By evening the market dispersed. Vani had collected banana skins

which people had discarded after eating the fruit. She sat by the street and ate the skins. I hit Vani. I snatched the skins and threw them away to stop her from eating them.

Suddenly, though, I changed my mind. I collected the banana skins and wiped them with my shirt as they were soiled. Then I went to the river, sat in a corner and started eating them. When I saw our teacher approaching, I threw away the skins. It was as if I was throwing away my stomach with hunger in it.

When I reached home my mother was sitting on a torn rag-quilt like Yama. Vani was crying and she grumbled, 'Mother, Anna hit me.' I replied sternly, 'She was eating banana skins thrown away by people.' When I accepted that I hit her, mother hissed at me, 'Let her eat worms and live. Why do you make it a matter of prestige?' I was quiet like the accused in a court of law with the Bhagawat Gita in his hands.

Somewhere in a corner of the market a barber plied his trade. I was a schoolboy, and wanted a haircut like that of other boys in the school. So, I went to the barber for the first time. Usually my mother shaved my head. She would buy a ten-paisa razor blade. Next, she dampened my hair with water like the laundry man soaks his clothes. Then she scraped my head crudely, bruising my scalp in many places, even making it bleed. I fussed a lot and cried. My mother boxed me in the stomach, still I yelled and created a furore. I felt as if my head was being skinned. Boys used my tonsured, oiled head like a drum which really annoyed me. My mother kept the same blade for the next time.

The barber first looked at me and then at my head. He shouted, 'Don't stand here. I am not going to shave your head.' I showed him my money in order to convince him. A customer from a different village who was getting his hair cut felt some sympathy for me. He asked me to sit down and take my turn. At that the barber, Isunath, got wild, 'He is a Mahar. Let him go.' How could this barber, who used to shave buffaloes in the village, refuse to shave my head?

Dattumama's son Arud used to have his head shaved by Isunath who did not know Arud's caste because Arud came from Chungi, a different village. We had to walk for miles to distant villages to get our heads shaved. Sometimes we walked to Chungi, at other times to Burhanpur.

Then, sometime later, Shrimantanna lodged a complaint in the police station against the barber. Since then this barber has been shaving our heads.

Santamai would get up early in the morning and stare at my face. When I was a baby she would tie me to her back while she swept the village streets. Now that I am grown-up I can understand almost everything. Every Wednesday Santamai swept the open ground outside the village. She collected garbage at many places. I used to sit near the garbage heap watching Santamai sweep. Her broom raised clouds of dust. Amidst the dust clouds Santamai kept sweeping briskly. By the time she finished she was covered with dust. When she finished sweeping I gathered the garbage in a tin. Santamai carried it to a garbage heap and threw it there. This was what we did early every morning. After the sweeping, the Wednesday market, cattle were untethered.

When we went about our morning routine we came across Sambhubaap. He was a devotee of the god Ithal, and was the Chokha Mahar of our Maharwada. He would be on his way to the Ithoba temple to say his prayers. He carried a saffron flag and tied a strip of cloth round his neck on which was written 'Chokha Mahar'. As a mark of reverence, we used to bow and touch his feet. He smeared holy ash on our foreheads. Returning from sweeping we regularly came across Shankar, a cattle-grazer. While gathering people's cattle he kept calling aloud 'Untie your animals!' He always carried a coarse, black, folded hand-spun blanket on his shoulder and carried a stick. Most of the time he limped, his feet swollen with corns.

On Wednesday mornings we ate leftover crumbs of bhakari with chutney. The butcher arrived in the afternoons with meat. The entire Maharwada crowded around him. Masamai never ate buffalo meat. So we bought the meat only when convinced it was beef. If the meat was fresh Santamai purchased a kilo or more, if stale, then just half a kilo. On Wednesdays we waited for the butcher eagerly as if expecting a guest. The butcher from Barhanpur used to bring a load of meat on his bicycle. The moment I spotted him at a distance I ran home and

announced his arrival to my mother. There was great excitement in all the huts at the arrival of the butcher.

People from every hut gathered at the community hall, as the butcher arranged his wares under the tamarind tree opposite the hall. He hung the trunk of a skinned animal on the branch of a tree and expertly cut the meat and weighed it in a balance. Dogs hung around scrabbling for discarded pieces. Women arrived with their plates and vessels and made a commotion. Many flies settled on the meat almost covering it. The butcher waved his hand frequently to drive the flies away. A kite would hover in the sky above the whole scene.

I would accompany my mother to buy meat. My mother quarrelled with the butcher for a nice piece of the thigh. She asked for more fat and virtually forced him to give me a few pieces free. Sometimes she bought a bit of shank-bone for me.

Masamai walked back home, the plate of beef covered with her sari. I tiptoed away when the butcher gave me a few pieces of discarded meat. On one such day, when a kite attacked me and scratched my hands with its talons, Masamai thumped my back and called me names.

Very early in the morning, after eating her bhakari and chutney, Santamai started her job of sweeping the market ground. I followed her, carrying bags. We either begged or picked up whatever we could from the market. That was our only remuneration because the village council never paid us.

Every cloth vendor in the market paid us ten paise. Sometimes we received a small quantity of sweets. The vegetable vendor would give us onions, chillies, rotten bananas, vegetables, guavas and such. Everyone there was a rascal. Nobody gave anything easily, but everybody became annoyed with us quickly. Santamai quarrelled with them. Often they asked us to come back later. We had to ask at least twice. When the bags were full I went home, emptied them, and returned to the market. We brought home everything we had collected at the market. I made many trips between my house and the market. We were happy on Wednesdays.

On Wednesdays we also washed and dried our clothes, and put them on to look smart. The entire Maharwada stayed in as people worked only until noon. After that they went for their weekly shopping.

With most of them away, the Maharwada looked lifeless. On Wednesdays people from the surrounding villages too came to the market. Our village became crowded. Shewanta too came to the market, where she went around like a whirlwind exchanging glances with me. Then by evening it was time for the market to close.

When the market closed, the cloth vendors tied their wares in bundles and carried them, one by one, to the bus stand. I used to hang around to see if I could get the job of carrying the bundles. When I did, I carried them on my head to the bus stand. This annoyed Dada as the porter's job was actually his and he would try to prevent me from usurping it.

I was young, innocent, and delicate. If squeezed, one of my cheeks might have yielded milk. If the other was squeezed it might have bled. It was the age to play truant. It was also the age when bad habits were picked up. I used to gather and smoke butts of discarded cigarettes and bidies. Girls fascinated me. I bathed, brushed my teeth every day, and even learned to carry water to wash while going out to shit.

There were about a hundred and twenty-five huts in our Maharwada. Ten to fifteen boys were from my class and there were seven to eight girls who had not yet reached puberty. I was crazy about a girl named Shewanta. Her house was rather bare and it disturbed me whenever I looked at it. The scorching sun, dogs with their tongues lolling in the heat, utterly charmless children, an old hag smoking, holes in the crumbling walls of the house, drunkards stumbling along. What else was there in our locality to interest one? But when Shewanta and I became interested in each other, even such depressing surroundings seemed attractive.

Shewanta's mother did whatever odd jobs she could find. Her father went out to dig. Shewanta looked after her three younger brothers and sisters. She was about ten or eleven years old. In a year or so she would reach puberty. Most of the time she carried her youngest brother in her arms. Her mother was also a midwife. Her two younger sisters cried almost continuously. They were all hungry, because her parents, when going out to work, left only two bhakaris in the house. The Maharwada survives on just a few morsels of bhakari and a little water. That is their staple food.

Shewanta never smiled wholeheartedly. She had never oiled her hair. At home Shewanta was like an ox harnessed to the oil press that goes round and round in a dark room from morning till evening. It was sheer drudgery. Shewanta's eyes were as humble as a cow's. Her mother wore an old sari, all patched up. Her father wore a ragged shirt. Shewanta used to pick out and crush lice from her sisters heads. I would watch Shewanta, as if I was witnessing an accident.

Whenever Shewanta stayed indoors for too long I would whistle, or sing. She knew the signals and would come out. She deliberately brought out some vessels, pretending to wash them. She followed me when I walked to the river. If she happened to go to the river first, I followed her. Without her I used to get bored. Shewanta reflected the sun, using a mirror, at me. I made signs and gestures with my hands to entertain her. I brought fresh tamarind fruit for her. We were really getting involved with each other.

I was playing and swimming in the river, waiting for Shewanta. My body was all covered with mud. Fish were trying to bite me, they tickled me. I forced the snot out of my nose and threw it in the water. Fish gathered round it. I used to take a stone and rub my body with it. If someone was washing clothes with soap, I removed mine and soaked them in the froth and lather. I helped them to dry their clothes so that they would allow me to wash my clothes in the foam that floated on the river water after their washing. I was very glad to wash my clothes in the foam. The front of my shirt was always dirty because I wiped my nose and slate with it.

Frog-shit used to float in the river, and also lumps of moss. A lump of moss always stuck to my hair after I dived and surfaced. I prayed that Shewanta would come early to the river.

At last she arrived. I was so nervous. What should I say to her? How was I to speak to her? I felt ashamed of myself. So far we had only smiled at each other from a distance. Whenever we came close we were scared and uneasy. Shewanta removed the moss stuck in my hair. She filtered water into her vessel holding the border of her sari at its mouth. She filled up her vessel with water. The sky too fell into the water. I was transformed into water. Soon she left me. Before going away she glanced back at me and smiled. I answered with a smile. I

asked her, through a gesture, to come back for more and she nodded. I was so excited with her acquiescence that I felt I should hoist the earth on my head and dance. I felt like running everywhere with the sky under my feet.

Once when Shewanta was approaching I decided to be bold. Come what may, I decided I would splash water on her. Wave after wave rose on the surface of the water. Pathway after pathway opened in my heart. I felt shy and when Shewanta entered the river, I began splashing water over her as if I were hurling flowers at her. Water on her face, her hair, her body. I had a great desire to lift her and carry her into the sunlight. I felt I should drench her completely, and then strip myself. I wanted to play roughly with her. I wished she too would begin splashing water on me, and we could both hide behind the rainbow.

Shewanta was puzzled. A drop of water from her hair dripped over her cheek like a pearl. Her eyes seemed purer than the river water. I felt I should hold her lips with my fingers and drink them like water, but Shewanta was scared.

She said, 'Please, Sharan, don't splash me. If I get drenched I have no clothes to change into.'

Though our bellies had water in them, the sand was getting hotter. Even cheating and swindling can go unnoticed but not such a romance. Our affair was known to the people in my house, while our love spread like a patch of rash on a leper's skin. Santamai promised that she would ask for Shewanta to be my bride. But how was it possible? I was an illegitimate child. How could we marry? Santamai then told the story of Rohidasmama. When Rohidasmama's affair became known, the entire Maharwada went for him with sticks and axes. Like rabid dogs they thirsted for his blood. Somehow Rohidasmama managed to escape. Santamai was moved, she said, 'The Mahars are a very fierce people. They will cut you into pieces, and there will be no one to care for us. Our house has neither a male child nor a female one to continue our lives. They will force us to sleep with them. You'd better stop your affair with Shewanta. If you marry any girl from the village the entire Maharwada will support you.'

It was summer time. Those days I didn't understand much. But I still clearly remember what happened. Santamai and I used to fetch raw materials for liquor from Chungi. At Chungi one could buy a cup of liquor for just one and a quarter rupee. We would sell the same bottle for one and a half rupees in our village. We added sal ammoniac and water to the stuff we had brought from Chungi and made a few more bottles out of it. That was our profit. Later we started brewing liquor in our own house. Santamai and Masamai had separate furnaces. Even their customers were different. Santamai and Masamai, mother and daughter, carried on their business as efficiently as men. Our family lived on the liquor business. If a cup was sold, it paid for our morning tea. Sometimes there was no customer till noon, so we went hungry. We waited for a customer as if we were waiting for God. We charged eight annas for a cup of liquor. Eight cups made one bottle and six bottles measured one gallon.

Four or five other families besides ours were also in the liquor business in our locality, like Damunna, Manakunna, Kamalakka. We poured water into a huge clay pot and added jaggery and sal ammoniac and let it ferment for a few days. We also stirred it every day. We opened the pot on the seventh day. Then this fermented stuff was boiled in a tin box. The vapour was distilled into another vessel and when the process was repeated seven times you got liquor. We collected this distilled liquor till the vessel was full.

A clay stove with a tin container of stuff on top was kept burning. On the top of the container was kept the upper half of the clay pot which we broke into two. Inside the clay pot we placed a vessel and over it a brass bowl. A high fire was maintained in the stove. When the raw material boiled, the steam of fermented water from the tin container dripped into the vessel. The lid over the mouth of the clay pot was sealed with dung, trapping the steam. The brass bowl was always filled with cold water which turned the steam of the fermented stuff into liquid, and drip by drip it collected in the vessel inside the clay pot. When the water of the brass bowl became hot it needed to be changed. When the water was changed seven times the process was complete.

The first round of the liquor was always the strongest. The boiled raw material was discarded as rubbish after the process. One's nose

filled with the stink of the boiling raw material. To us the smell of liquor was a familiar one.

Our house was always crammed with customers. Sometimes they continued drinking late into the night and we went to sleep while they were still there. Sometimes there was a quarrel. Often they arrived when we were having our meal. They kept vomitting even as we ate. Their vomit stank. They brought out everything they had eaten. We continued with our meal. Mother would clean their vomit while keeping up a stream of abuse. They continued to sit unmoved and shameless, taking no notice of her scolding.

When the customers came in groups of twos and fours they continued drinking for hours. Cup after cup, they drank the liquor. They would ask me to get salt, or salted gram from the shop. I obeyed them, as sometimes they gave me a little chivda that they had on them. When they drank for long hours they would spit everywhere in the house. My mother would get annoyed. When they started flirting with my mother, she quarrelled with them.

Many a time I saw them holding my mother's hand while she served them drinks. I was helpless, the very nature of this liquor business was such. I had to serve them when my mother wasn't in. Whatever money I had collected I gave to my mother. In return for my promptness she gave me ten paise to go out and eat something. She considered the money I collected first as auspicious. I felt better. I thought I should always collect money from the first customer.

There was a constant fear of the police, so we buried the liquor under the rubbish in pots and vessels and kept watch as if we were protecting a harvest. We took the liquor out as required. Whenever the police arrived, people ran all around in panic. Sometimes they surrounded us. On such occasions we had no choice but to throw the liquor away into the rubbish. Sometimes we emptied it in the bathroom and poured vessels of water over it. We even tried to hide a tubeful of liquor in the attic. The police caught whoever they suspected.

Once we were surrounded by the police. Manakunna was caught red-handed in his house. There were only two bottles in his house, but that was enough evidence for the police who set about arresting Manakunna. But before he ran away he began breaking the bottles that

the policemen had seized, like a teacher canes the hands of pupils. I felt I too should be brave like him. When Manakunna returned from prison he would bow before the elders and touch their feet to be blessed. Everyone in the Maharwada inquired about his well-being. Manakunna abused the police in the worst terms because they had treated him very roughly.

After the police raid we not only suffered financially but in many other ways also. Our lives were disrupted. We had to borrow money and start the business all over again. There was always the threat of a police raid. Sometimes we knew about it beforehand.

I had to taste the stuff first, to see if it was mild or strong. A piece of cloth, dipped in the brewed stuff had to burn instantly. The brighter the flames, the stronger the stuff. That's how we tested it. Sometimes the brewing went wrong and the liquor was weak. This was the stuff we had brewed quickly in two or three days. It tasted sour, but was good enough to get tipsy on. When the stuff was not good, customers refused it and stopped coming. They complained, 'This stuff is like water. You seem to have added water to it. When you take money from us why can't you give a fair return for it?'

When the liquor was good the customers were happy. We were pleased with the compliments. My mother tried to convince them, 'We never add water. We don't want any money earned by wrong means. We will never make money that way.'

When the liquor was about to run out and customers kept coming Santamai did add water and made two bottles out of one. Sometimes she added sal ammoniac powder to the stuff. Young boys, who had just started drinking sneaked in. Sarpate, the teacher, used to drink on credit. When a customer was half-drunk he wouldn't even notice if you served him the water the bottles were washed in.

Sometimes I had to go on a bicycle to bring the stuff. I would take a tube in which I brought the stuff, tied to my bicycle. On such trips the people from whom I bought my stuff would give me some of it to drink as a sample. I had to cycle along odd routes, avoiding the main road. Testing the samples made me tipsy and on the way back I stumbled frequently. Once I even fell off. It was a difficult ride on the bicycle as I was almost drunk. Some shepherds helped me get back up. When I

returned home my mother scolded me, 'You can drink as much as you like when you come back home. If you were to die on the way?'

One day Kamalakka and Nirmi went to Chungi to get the stuff. Kamalakka was a robust woman who had been deserted by her husband. Nirmi was about ten years old. The two of them left very early that morning. They had to walk six miles to and fro. They didn't return until late that evening. Normally they would have returned by early evening. So we started looking for them. Had they been caught by the police? Or had they been beaten on the way? Such thoughts crowded our minds.

Nothing of the kind had happened; they were drunk, and lying by the roadside when we found them. Kamalakka's sari was all dishevelled. Nirmi's eyes were so heavy, she couldn't even open them. Both lay with the full tube of liquor under their heads. We rushed towards them. When we went closer Masamai started crying. She said sorrowfully, 'I should not have taken the risk of sending my child with this Kamali.'

My mother asked me to carry the full tube back home. Nagi and I walked stumbling along the stream towards home. Santamai began praying to Laginsha to restore Nirmi to her senses.

Drinking is an invitation to a quarrel. Everyone in the house drank, including me. Liquor was like tea to us. When Bashakaka was the sarpanch, life was good. Santamai was the village-sweeper. Dada used to light the street lamps in the evenings. Life was steady and comfortable. Dada, on his way to light the street lamps, used to carry a ladder on his shoulder. In his hand he carried a kerosene can and went around the village, filling up the street lamps with kerosene. In every lane he put his ladder against the lamp post and climbed up. He cleaned the lamp glass with his dirty scarf. Then he brought the lamp down, poured kerosene into it, lit it, and fixed it once again to the top of the lamp post. Sometimes he stole a little kerosene and brought it home. If we came across anybody on the way he asked me to greet them. If we came across Bashakaka I used to say 'Aale koom salam' in greeting. Santamai and I would keep awake till Dada returned after lighting the lamps.

Bashakaka was a Muslim sarpanch and his party was weak in village politics. Sometimes Santamai and I would stay for a whole day at Bashakaka's house. Santamai did sundry chores, like fetching flour from the grinding mill, or sweeping the house. While she worked I was free

to play anywhere in Bashakaka's mansion. Whenever the butcher visited the village to sell beef, she would take cow's meat to his house. Once at Bashakaka's house, a man from Basalegaon gave me some new clothes. He was Hanmanta's messenger.

Later, Girmallya was elected sarpanch of the village. He removed Dada from his work of lighting the street lamps because Dada happened to be a Muslim. Dada's name was Mahmood Dastagir Jamadar. Girmallya, the new sarpanch, was a Wani. He was from the opposite political party and didn't want a Muslim Kotwal, that is Dada, who had been appointed by Bashakaka. Even Santamai was sacked from her job as a sweeper. Girmallya appointed his own people. It was Maloo's Sona who now swept the market, and her elder son Sheshu who had to light the lamps.

Later on gas lamps replaced the kerosene ones. The task of lighting gas lamps was rather risky. As Sheshu was an alcoholic, Shrimantanna accompanied him on his job of lighting the gas lamps. But one evening, a gas lamp exploded, and both Sheshu and Shrimantanna went up in flames.

Sheshu's body, spattered all over with kerosene, was caught in the flames like a hut on fire. He ran around, his body aflame, shouting for help. Shrimantanna, who was wearing only shorts, ran away and dipped himself in the sewage from a toilet. By then he was almost half-burnt. Soon the village gathered but none dared to save Sheshu whose body was completely aflame.

Girmallya tried to save Sheshu by pouring a pot of water over him and moving him to the hospital in town. The whole village was saddened by what had happened. The shock drove Maloo's Sona mad.

On the third day after the event, Sheshu's corpse arrived, wrapped in neem leaves. Sheshu was dead but for many days I continued to dream that the village square was on fire. Several times I saw Sheshu in flames. In a way it was good that Dada had lost his job.

Dada was uncontrollable whenever he got drunk, so people would beat him up. He just threw away coins and tore up currency bills. This was the money he had earned with his hard labour as a porter. He abused Girmallya. The small children of the village mocked and teased him. He abused them in rhyme, 'Jummako chodu teri Amma ko' (Fuck your mother on Friday), and wallowed in some gutter. Santamai, Nagi,

Nirmi, and I would help him to his feet. His dhoti would be all dishevelled; Santamai would adjust it for him. Suddenly he would burst into abuse. Santamai in turn would shout at him, trying to silence him. Nagi, Nirmi, and Santamai normally carried him home. I followed carrying his chappals.

Whenever Dada got drunk he quarrelled with Santamai in particular. Their quarrels puzzled and distressed me. We slept in a row. On one side there was my drunken grandfather and on the other, my grandmother who coughed all night through. Before going to sleep Santamai prayed to goddesses like Ambabai and Laxmi. On the other hand Dada uttered names like Haidari Khwaja, Bandenawaj, Hajimling, Langishawali, Sidhayappa, Allah Bismillah, Maulah ... Sometimes, a spirit possessed Santamai, who would begin to screech in a shrill voice. This would wrench me out of my sleep. The way Santamai went on scared me. I would stand outside the house, shivering. Santamai's shrill shrieks were horrible. Dada would remove bits of the soil plaster from the wall and put a mark on her forehead like the holy ash from the temple. After that Santamai would slowly return to normal.

Sometimes Santamai too got drunk, and if on that day Dada was drunk, there would be a fierce quarrel between them. Santamai sometimes even boxed Dada. Dada then threw away his plate, full of food which scattered on the ground. On such occassions Champi, the bitch, filled her belly. Dada would then ask Santamai, 'Did the Imam visit you?' That made Santamai wild and she would abuse him terribly, reducing me to tears.

One day there was a cradle-ceremony. For the first time since my birth I was to be placed in a cradle. The rituals were to go on for five days. Santamai had only one brother who was a woodcutter. His life depended on the axe, as he lived by selling the wood he cut. As soon as he arrived, Masamai asked him to come and see the baby, but he wouldn't listen to her. Instead he went to cut wood saying, 'That will help to boil the water for the baby's bath.' He was being driven by his fate. How can destiny be evaded?

Laxman was cutting the tree behind our house. The sound of his axe against the tree was clear. With each stroke, chips scattered all around.

There was always something threatening about that tree; it looked as if it would fall on you any moment. Whenever there was a wind the tree made a noise like teeth being ground. It always looked dark and ominous. Whenever an owl cried from this tree we were scared.

Some time later there was a big sound of the tree cracking. Masamai felt a spasm in her stomach. The tree had fallen, killing Laxman. Though he tried to save himself, his head was smashed under the tree. Satubaap's line had thus come to an end. Instead of the baby being placed in a cradle, they put Laxman's corpse into a bullock cart and took it away for a post mortem.

My birth was considered inauspicious, as I was born at midnight. After the delivery Masamai, my mother, sat with me in her lap. My first cry disturbed Santamai and Dada's sleep. Dada suddenly woke up and thought that a cat fight was on. He picked up a piece of wood and rushed out into the dark to drive the cats away. Alarmed, Masamai shouted, 'It's the baby, you will kill him.'

As Satubaap's line had come to an end with Laxman's death, Santamai now attended to his jobs. It was she who swept the streets in the village and lit the bonfire that kept the villagers warm during winter. She had to collect the leaves of the madder plant that they smoked in their pipes. She had to smear with dung the platform of the village square where the villagers gathered for meetings and functions. Sometimes she was asked to take files to the town office which was ten miles away. Dada was then working as the village nightwatchman.

One starry night Santamai was washing her clothes in the river. The stars trembled in the river water. The Imam too came there. Nobody could hear what they were talking about. Dada saw them talking to each other, which was enough to anger him. After that, whenever Dada was drunk, he humiliated Santamai by asking her if the Imam had visited her that day. Dada's teeth had fallen out, his hair had gone white, his face was a mesh of wrinkles; and yet whenever Dada got a chance he humiliated Santamai. On such occasions his words were like blood gushing out of a wound. Santamai too got wild. Then her eyes overflowed with tears, and she felt like an uprooted tree.

Muley Bhimsya was another drunkard. Drunkeness had driven him to sell his house, land and whatever else he could. So many others in

our village had taken to drink. The street connecting the village to the Maharwada was full of drunkards. Drunkards accepted liquor from the house of a Mahar but not water. They had affairs with Mahar women but wouldn't accept the food they cooked.

People from the Maharwada involved in the brewing business bribed the village constable regularly. They even provided him with liquor and chicken. My family never paid anything to the police though we were in the business. The constable and others from the police station shared the bribes they received. They never gave anything to the village police Patil. He was responsible for our family and he stayed with us whenever he could. I used to call him 'kaka'.

Masamai, Santamai's only daughter, is my mother. She was married to Ithal Kamble, a very poor man. They worked as grass mowers and never had enough to eat. After mowing the grass they had to carry the bundles to the town four miles away. Only after selling a bundle did they have money to buy things for their daily meal. Sometimes they collected and sold twigs and faggots. Our meals depended on our daily earnings. Sometimes Santamai and Dada walked all the way to Basalegaon, ten to twelve miles away, carrying a headload of eatables for Masamai. In those days there was no bus transport.

Ithal Kamble was a farm worker on a yearly contract to a landlord. It was a job worth seven or eight hundred rupees. He worked hard, day and night, on the fields as well as in the house of the landlord. He was one of the beasts that toiled on the farm. The animals in the shed he looked after were no different from this bonded labourer. Ithal Kamble's poverty was his sad lot, like the yoke-inflamed shoulder of an ox. He worried perpetually about his food. His ribs looked like marks of a whip on the skin of an ox. His stomach was so shrunken that it seemed to suck his back like a lap fly. His life had turned into a cattleshed. How was one to bridle one's tears? How long can one munch on an empty stomach? One had to toil like oxen at a plough. The water that sang in the farm-channels carried in it a restless drop of his sweat.

Ithal Kamble toiled on the farm owned by Hanmanta Limbale, a Patil, who helped him during hard times. But while helping Ithal Kamble, the Patil's intention was quite different. This rich man was out to ruin a poor man's family which was happy in its own way.

The caste council forced Masamai to divorce Kamble. This separated her from her suckling baby, and her four-year-old son Dharma. Masamai wept when she left her husband's house, without her two children. Dharma and Suryakant too began crying as they wanted to go with her. The relationship between a husband and a wife can come to an end, but what about the relationship between a mother and her sons?

Now Masamai was a free woman. To make a living she carried headloads of wood and sold them in the town every day. Before the divorce she had been busy with her husband, children and domestic responsibilities. But now uprooted, she felt like Sita lost in the Dandakaryana searching for shelter.

Ithal Kamble remarried. A man can eat paan and spit as many times as he likes, but the same is not possible for a woman. It is considered wrong if a woman does that. Once her chastity is lost it can never be restored.

How could Masamai marry now? There wasn't a grain to eat in her house. Deserted by her husband she was a free woman and yet would never regain the status of a wife.

Dadunya was a Gondhali from our village. He and his group used to go around singing folk songs and hymns. He also performed folk plays. In his leisure time, Dadunya sold utensils in the neighbouring villages. He needed a female singer in his group so he approached Masamai. She was expected to sing, accompanied by others on drums and a one-stringed instrument. My mother refused the offer as she was determined to live on her own.

Hanmanta Limbale lured Masamai. She was given a rented house at Akkalkot, which she accepted. It was a kind of revenge to live openly with the same man who had uprooted her from her family. Hanmanta Limbale now possessed her like a pet dove. They lived happily. Masamai became pregnant, and gave birth to a son. Who's the father of this boy? Hanmanta didn't want any of this to happen, but who can disown a child? A child is a reality.

After my birth the mansions of the Patil community must have become tense. My first breath must have threatened the morality of the world. With my first cry at birth, milk must have splashed from the breasts of every Kunti.

Why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into the world? Why did she put up with the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse for nine months and nine days and allow me to grow in the foetus? Why did she allow this bitter embryo to grow? How many eyes must have humiliated her because they considered her a whore? Did anyone distribute sweets to celebrate my birth? Did anyone admire me affectionately? Did anyone celebrate my naming ceremony? Which family would claim me as its descendant? Whose son am I, really?

Close to our house lived Gangoobai, a woman, who was a nostrum monger. She was my mother's friend. Gangoobai would tie me on her back and go around the streets shouting and selling needles, charmed and coloured threads, anacardium, etc. She would exhibit me to the people in the houses she visited. Out of sympathy they gave oil for my baby scalp, old clothes, and food. My mother would get annoyed with Gangoobai for using me to beg, to arouse people's sympathy. Gangoobai said sadly, 'When I show them a baby, people give so many things out of charity. Am I killing your baby?' Then they quarrelled. Whenever my mother went out to do something, Gangoobai sneaked me out of my cradle and went around begging.

One day when I was studying for the matriculation exam, Gangoobai came to the town pretending she wanted to sell her things. She visited our house. My mother made tea for her. When Gangoobai saw me, she pulled me close for a kiss. Stroking my back she asked if I would like to go to Akkalkot with her. She advised me to go to the law against my father. Sometimes she exchanged her items for stale bhakaris and old clothes. When Gangoobai left I was quite upset. I was growing like Karna in the Mahabharata.

Lately Hanmanta had been trying to avoid us and there were quarrels every day. Hanmanta did not acknowledge me as his offspring. He said I resembled Dhondya, the potter. Dhondya was a well-known rogue of the British days. Finally my mother and I came to stay with Santamai, my grandmother. Only a mother and the earth can accommodate and stomach everything.

To be born beautiful among Dalits is a curse. There is a famous saying that the neighbour's wife is always more beautiful than one's own. Everyone in the village chases a beautiful woman. Masamai was beautiful

and she suffered for it. She was divorced by her husband, after which Hanmanta enjoyed her and then deserted her. I never received her wholehearted love. How long would she go on being a woman without a man?

People who enjoy high-caste privileges, authority sanctioned by religion, and inherit property, have exploited the Dalits of this land. The Patils in every village have made whores of the wives of Dalit farm labourers. A poor Dalit girl on attaining puberty has invariably been a victim of their lust. There is a whole breed born to adulterous Patils. There are Dalit families that survive by pleasing the Patils sexually. The whole village considers such a house as the house of the Patil's whore. Even the children born to her from her husband are considered the children of a Patil. Besides survival on the charity of a Patil what else can such a household expect?

Nagi, my sister, was born after me. Then Nirmi, Vani, Suni, Pami, Tamma, Indira, Sidramma, so many children! We were born one after another. All younger than me. We were all of one womb and one blood. We shared a common mother but different fathers.

Masamai had three children from Ithal Kamble. The first-born son Bhanudas didn't live long. Then came Suryakant and Dharma. The two sons were snatched away from Masamai and then she was deserted by her husband Ithal Kamble. I was born from her affair with Hanmanta Patil. Masamai had Nagubai, Nirmala, Vanmala, Sunanda, Pramila, Shrikant, Indira and Sidram from Kaka, whose name was Yeshwantrao Sidramappa Patil, the head of the village named Hanoor. Because they are registered as Hindu Lingayats in the official records, they are accepted neither by the Mahar community nor by the Lingayat community, so we live in a semi-Maharwada of our own.

My father and his forefathers were Lingayat. Therefore I am one too. My mother was Mahar. My mother's father and forefathers were Mahar, hence I am also a Mahar. From the day I was born until today, I was brought up by my grandfather Mahmood Dastagir Jamadar. My grandfather in the sense he lives with my grandmother, Santamai. Does this mean I am Muslim as well? Then why can't the Jamadar's affection claim me as Muslim? How can I be high caste when my mother is untouchable? If I am untouchable, what about my father who is high caste? I am like

Jarasandh. Half of me belongs to the village, whereas the other half is excommunicated. Who *am* I? To whom is my umbilical cord connected?

After Dada lost his job with the village council, he started working as a porter in the bus station. Every day seven or eight buses arrived. The last bus stayed overnight. We managed our daily expenses on one or one-and-a half rupees. By now Dada's teeth had begun to fall. His eyesight had become weak. He was no longer healthy and yet he had to carry loads of luggage to the top of the bus.

This story is set during the time when India became independent. The Hindus and Muslims were rioting. The army was deployed to liberate Hyderabad state from the Nizam's rule. Both the soldiers as well as the Hindus committed atrocities on the Muslims, killing them in a frenzy. The wives and daughters of the Muslims were forcibly taken away. After the action, when the army was withdrawing, they marched by our village. Jagannath Patil was then the village chief and Dada the village kotwal. Jagannath Patil arranged a meal for the soldiers. The soldiers were relaxing after their food. Dada removed the turban from his head unawares. The soldiers did not see any tuft on his tonsured head which was clean shaven, so, wild with rage, they pointed guns at him. They also removed his dhoti and found he was circumcised. This confirmed he was a Muslim. When they were about to shoot him Jagannath Patil interfered and with great difficulty somehow managed to save him. What sins did the Muslims commit to be tortured, humiliated and killed like this? If Dada had been killed we would have been homeless. Santamai too is very old and cannot work any more. I am a parasite. It is only when Dada earns his daily wage that we get something to eat.

Muslims have a tradition that allows them four wives. Dada was the first son of the first wife of Dastagir Jamadar. Dada was married to a woman from Barhanpur, but they were childless, so his wife deserted him. Since then Dada has been living with Santamai. He has groomed me with great affection, as if I were his own child. Neither his religion nor my caste was a hindrance to us. Is it man who is a hindrance to religion or is it the other way round? Is the premise of religion greater than man's? Is religion made for man or man made for religion? Does

man cause religion to degenerate, or is it religion that degnerates man? Can't man exist without religion and caste?

Dada used to get drunk on Wednesdays; it was market day and he earned more on that day, maybe five or six rupees. On Wednesdays, Dada would give Nirmi, Vani, and me ten paise each to spend in the market. In the evening Dada and Santamai quarrelled a lot over the money. Neither of them ate that night. The mutton which was specially cooked by Santamai would remain uneaten. Next morning Santamai would heat and eat it.

I had the habit of wetting my bed. Everybody got annoyed with me and threatened to burn my penis. The sheets that I had wet were spread out in the sun to dry. The same sheets were used night after night, so my sheets stank horribly. But as I was used to it, I didn't find it odd at all.

We depended on our daily wages. Dada, who was a porter, was the only earning member. His earnings, though small, were all we had. If we earned any money we'd have something to eat—that was our life. On Saturdays there was no money as there was no work. Monday was the market day at Akkalkot, so we earned five or six rupees on that day. This helped us to pull on till Wednesday, which was our village market day. This was a better day for income. The next two days, that is Thursday and Friday, were managed on Wednesday's earnings. Dada had the habit of talking in his sleep and in them he muttered many names demanding his wages from them. He even mentioned the destination asking me to change the nameplates on the bus.

Payment for carrying one bundle of luggage to the top of the bus was ten paise. We counted days with each ten paise. If this bus fetched twenty paise how much would the next one fetch? Adding the money from the two buses we calculated how much more we needed to buy a kilo of grain. Suppose we didn't earn anything today, who could we borrow from? Our eyes were fixed in the direction from which the bus would arrive. Dada asked for bidies from someone. Santamai asked for tobacco, which she kept chewing. Dada gave me half the tea that people offered him. If somebody offered only half a cup, he gave it to Santamai. This ten paise worth of tea was very precious to us. For the sake of ten paise Dada had to carry heavy loads of luggage, even risking his life. We

couldn't afford even our craving for a cup of tea. We saved money to buy jowar, rather than spend it on tea.

Whenever Dada asked me to change the plates on the bus I puffed up with pride. The driver's seat attracted me greatly. While stepping down from the bus I would take away a handful of foam from the seats. This I would take to school, soak in water and use to wipe my slate.

Whenever the bus arrived I would salute the driver and if he responded, felt so pleased with myself, but if he didn't I felt hurt. Then I would abuse him in a rhyme: motarla killi nhay, driverla bulli nhay (The bus has no key, and the driver has no penis). By then the bus would have passed by, raising dust.

Every bus meant bread and butter for us. We waited at the bus stand for a bus as a prostitute waits for her customers. The moment I saw a bus at a distance I became excited hoping that this bus would provide at least a few annas and Dada could buy me a cup of tea. Sometimes the bus was almost empty and we didn't earn anything. No passenger alighted from the bus nor did anyone board it. It came and went empty without passengers, like the foetus of a barren woman. Yet we kept our hopes alive like a womb cared for after an abortion. Unlit clay stove, empty bread basket, and a bus that brought no money were our constant worries.

Most of the time we went hungry. Sometimes there was only one bhakari in the basket. How could this one bhakari be enough for me, Dada, and Santamai? Santamai's face would then look as if she was staring at a graveyard. She made me eat and went hungry herself. I was the cause of the worry on such days. I would give just water to my hungry Dada. He drank it as if he were pouring water in the radiator of a bus.

One day while Dada was carrying a sackful of jowar to the top of the bus the sack slipped and fell. The bus conductor moved aside quickly, narrowly escaping death. The conductor abused Dada and asked him to stop working as a porter. I trembled and my stomach split, turning inside out, like a bus gone topsy-turvy after an accident. What would happen to us if Dada lost his job?

Sometimes many days passed uneventfully like an intercalary month. The only event of note was the coming and the going of buses. A man

arrived from some city. He fascinated us. I kept looking at him. I spent most of the time sitting on the bench inside the bus stand. To us the bus stand was like home. During the day we stored our blankets and sheets beneath the benches to be taken out at night for use. We would sleep in the bus stand. Passengers who had missed their last bus were our companions. The crazy bitch Janny kept chewing at old rags throughout the night. We lay like discarded bus tickets. We had to get up early in the morning or risk annoying the driver and the conductor. Once they actually threw our sheets and rugs out on the road.

Masamai, my mother, always treated me as if I were her stepson. I was more attached to Santamai, my grandmother. Whenever Masamai began to hit me Santamai would intervene and save me. Then the two women quarrelled. Once they quarrelled so fiercely on my account that Santamai, in a rage, left the Maharwada. After that we started living at the bus stand. We worked, earned what we could, ate and slept there.

Initially we lived in the open behind the bus stand. We made stoves by arranging stones. Half the fire went waste because of the unruly wind. It was very difficult to make our bhakaris.

My duty was to gather twigs, rags, and bits of paper for fuel. If I picked up something from a farm its owner would beat me and drive me away. My hands and legs were bruised and torn by thorn pricks. We ate and lived in the open behind the bus stand. Four tin sheets offered us shelter during the rainy season.

We washed and cleaned liquor bottles to store edible oil and kerosene. Two clay-pots and a stove made by arranging the stones were our important possessions in this new dwelling. During the rains our house leaked and in summer the sun seeped through the holes in the tin. Our house was so small that if you stretched your legs they would kick the stove to pieces. Every night Santamai warned me, 'Don't stretch your legs in your sleep.' But I couldn't help it. One basket for bhakaris, one dented aluminium vessel, two aluminium plates, two aluminium cooking vessels piled one on top of the other, clay pots, and one wooden chest for clothes made our home. Dada had brought one tile from somewhere on which Santamai made bhakaris, and the same tile was used to crush chillies for chutney.

We stored bhakaris in the wooden chest and ate them with curry from

time to time. The chest was full of cockroaches and bugs. Sometimes there were dead cockroaches in the curry kept in clay pots. We threw the cockroaches away and ate the curry. The bugs hid in the wooden chest and to kill them we had to place it in the sun. That chest did not have a lock. So Santamai knotted a piece of rag instead. She would count the knots to find out if someone had tried to open it. Even the tin box of flour was kept high above the ground and the level of flour was marked. Our door had no lock; so it too was tied with a rag. To prevent my clothes being soiled by dust and smoke they were wrapped in a plastic sheet and kept in the wooden chest.

Once somebody forgot his tiffin on the bus. I saw it when I went into the bus to change the plate. I told Nagi this and she entered the bus and sneaked out with the tiffin box. I opened the lock with a nail. My mouth watered when we opened it. Whose lucky face had we seen that morning that had brought us a good meal?

Dada worked as a porter in the bus stand, but if he had a chance to carry luggage to other villages he would do so too. He carried the load on his head and walked for miles on an empty stomach. He gave his wages to Santamai, who then went to the village to buy grain and other things while I fetched cereals and oil from the shop.

Santamai would sweep the bus stand early in the morning. The tea-stall owner would give her a cup of tea, of which she gave me half. Dada would clean the bus, fill up the radiator, roll the curtains up and fasten them, change the destination plate, etc. For our morning tea we had to save something from our previous day's earnings; if not we had to go without, until we earned something in the morning. Dada fetched water for the tea-stall owner at the bus stop, for which he was given a cup of tea. He also did other sundry work for the owner. Dada had a credit account with him which they settled after Dada got his wages or against Dada's fetching water for him.

The second bus in the morning brought newspapers. Sometimes I would go around distributing them, otherwise Santamai or even Dada did it. In the same bus Girmallya's can of milk was sent to the town to be sold. The tiffins of the village boys, who had gone to Akkalkot for further education were loaded on the same bus by us. Occasionally Girmallya helped us in our difficult times.

The moment I noticed the dust raised by a bus on the slopes of Barhanpur I simply floated in the air. I was happy at the thought that there would be work and money. I used to pray earnestly that we would earn something. As the bus neared if I noticed that it was not loaded I would become scared and upset. Yet I kept on praying that we would be provided with money at least for our tea. I was as miserable as a woman nauseous from travelling on a bus.

Once, we had a guest and no money to pay even for his tea. Kashinath, the tea-stall owner was away. So we couldn't ask for credit. Old man Ghenappa who looked after the tea-stall in Kashinath's absence would not give us credit. We were in a fix and felt helpless. I sat in a corner like a barren hen trying to hatch an egg. Dada was waiting for a bus. Santamai's face looked like a cave discovered during excavation, while the guest sat like a refugee.

A bus arrived and just then the driver jumped out. Dada opened the door for the passengers. The conductor too got down. To me a driver and a conductor were great people. Some of them were kind. They called Santamai 'the old lady' and sometimes gave her money for paan and tobacco.

Dada never ate his dinner until the last bus, which stayed overnight, arrived. He kept waiting eagerly for the bus. When it arrived the conductor was the first one to get down, and then the passengers got off one by one. Dada would shout, 'Is there any luggage?' If he happened to see a bundle inside the bus he tried to get it out even though the passengers wouldn't let him, as they wanted to carry the load themselves. Sometimes, when they refused to pay because they were poor, there was a quarrel. If the driver and the conductor happened to be drunkards they demanded liquor and eggs. Sometimes they even shared them with Dada. Hope is a strange thing. Expecting food and liquor, Dada waited impatiently for the last bus which halted for the night.

That day a bus arrived loaded with blocks of jaggery. I was very excited. The guest, our visitor, proved to be lucky. Now we would get our wages. Dada carried down all the blocks of jaggery which belonged to Jagannath Patil, the owner of a provision shop. After bringing all the jaggery down, Dada told me that there was still some left on the top. I immediately climbed up to the top of the bus.

The heat had melted the jaggery and it had spread and stuck to the top. I scraped it off in flakes. There was quite a lot for me to gather. That jaggery would see us through for four days of tea. Somehow we had jaggery but what about tea powder? This problem seemed like a baby obstructed in its mother's womb, refusing to come out.

Ghenappa the tea-stall owner at the bus stand would throw the used tea powder behind the bus-stop after boiling and straining it. I went there and gathered the discarded tea powder. We made black tea and drank the decoction, plate after plate. Our hunger subsided and we felt better.

The teacher decided to enrol my name in the register after I attended school regularly for four to five days. When he was convinced that I was serious about my schooling he asked me my father's name. I did not know my father's name. Strange that I too could have a father!

I started attending school regularly. The teacher, Bhosale by name, would sarcastically call me the Patil of Baslegaon. I felt good as well as bad to be called Patil.

The name of Hanmanta Limbale, the Patil of Baslegaon, was added to my name in the school record. When Hanmanta came to know this he arrived with four or five rowdies. His relatives too joined him and they all went to the headmaster. In those days the salary of a teacher was only seventy rupees a month. Hanmanta tried to bribe the headmaster by offering him a hundred rupees. Next he threatened the headmaster at gun point. But Bhosale, the headmaster, was an upright man. He wouldn't yield either to bribery or to threats. He said boldly, 'The mother of this boy will say who the father is, and I will register only that name in the record.' There was a quarrel. Hanmanta tried all his tricks desperately. He even pleaded. Finally he had to go away unsuccessful. I owe my father's name to Bhosale, the headmaster.

Masamai often told me that Kaka's mansion in the village was a dark one. Whenever I went to the village I looked for Kaka's dark mansion somewhere near the village entrance, but I could never find it. My mother would tell me that Kaka had a son, a wife, and parents, and that they all lived in the mansion. All this baffled me.

So Kaka had yet one more house, yet another wife and children. Why then did he keep visiting our house? I always thought that Kaka and my mother were husband and wife. The whole thing baffled me. Kaka always sneaked into our house. Whenever he visited us he sat with us, spoke and laughed with us. He behaved like the man of our house. To us Kaka was like a father.

Whenever I went to the village I looked for Kaka's mansion. Was Kaka's wife beautiful? What did Kaka's son look like? What did Kaka's parents look like? What sort of a dark mansion was it? Such thoughts always rushed into my mind. While walking through the village I looked for Kaka's mansion with the help of the pointers my mother had given me. Once I spotted Kaka in a mansion. That's how, at last, I discovered Kaka's mansion. Expecting to be noticed and invited in, I deliberately lingered by Kaka's mansion, but the moment he noticed me he shut the door. I returned home with a sad face.

Whenever Kaka visited us he behaved as if he were our father. Then why did he behave like a stranger now? Why didn't he speak to me? It was difficult for me to think of Kaka as my father. I was angry with him. I felt like raping his mother some day. I was livid with rage. I couldn't forget the act of intercourse between Kaka and my mother that I had seen through a slit in the door. I thought of Kaka's mother, Taramai, a toothless woman. She would pour water into my hands without touching me while I drank, kneeling. The only consolation was that at least I could drink water at Kaka's mansion.

Every year our village suffered from an epidemic of cholera. We called it 'Mariai's wind', believing it to be the curse of the goddess. Stricken people died very quickly. Something had to be done. A male buffalo was sacrificed to appease Mariai at which time Potraj danced in front of the goddess. In the evening a decorated palanquin was carried in the name of Mariai. We performed the rituals of transferring the curse to the neighbouring village.

Kaka asked Jenthigya, the village drummer, to go around and announce the onset of the epidemic. At every corner Jenthigya stopped and beat his drum to draw the attention of the people and made the

announcement at the top of his voice. The moment she heard Jenthigya's drum my mother stopped our play and noise and listened carefully to what Jenthigya was announcing. People came out of their houses and stood in the open space. Only then were we able to hear clearly what Jenthigya was saying.

Once he came with the announcement that henceforth our village belonged to the Karnataka State. On yet another occasion he announced that the Kurnoor Dam project would be undertaken very soon. Our village happened to be on the border of Maharashtra and Karnataka States. A clear boundary between these two States had never been agreed upon.

Our villagers used to argue endlessly about the border issue and the Kurnoor Dam project. The news about the commencement of the project had been in the air for quite some time but it all seemed to be only a rumour as the project showed no sign of progress. People argued vehemently about both the problems.

Jenthigya also played his drum on two special occasions: during a death procession and at the annual wrestling competition. His drum spoke more clearly than his words. Jenthigya made a bonfire in front of his house and heated his drum whenever he needed to play it. During a performance of Lezim, Jenthigya played his drum in such a way that the beats sounded like a man speaking.

During the cholera epidemic doctors from the city visited our village to vaccinate the population. Boys and girls were vaccinated first. I was scared of injections so I screamed and cried a lot. I even ran away. Everyone in my house was scared of injections, including Santamai, who would hide me and my sisters somewhere in the fields. My mother kept the door shut as she too was afraid.

Instead of the vaccination Santamai would smear our foreheads with ash from the clay stove or dust scraped from the wall. She then prayed to the goddess, 'Oh mother Ambabai please cure this child,' and so on.

Parshya is our neighbour. His father Lakhubaap is a grand old man who knows black magic. He gave sacred ash to the possessed and tied talismans on them. He was much sought after and visited other villages a good deal of the time. Parshya would invoke and call Indrajal out of a magic box. We—Harya, Parshya, and I—even tried to learn hypnotism.

We simulated the rituals to attract girls in the school. Harya was a rascal who tried many tricks for that purpose.

While we did such things, Kaka brought books for me like the Mahabharata, Ramayana, *Harivijay, Pandavpratap, Shivleelamrut, Kashikhand, Markandpuran, Navnathkathasagar, Totamaina, Vetalpanchvishi, Simhasan-battishi,* and so on. I used to read the Bhagawat Gita every day. I knew *Indrajal* by heart. From somewhere Harya had brought *Kamasutra.* All this happened while we were in the fifth or sixth form.

In those days, people would throw stones at the Maharwada. One day Nagi was hit by a stone. Even in the safety of our houses we were afraid. People said that someone must be performing black magic and that was why stones came hurtling at us. Santamai would abuse everyone, because it is said that such abuse afflicts the one who performs black magic. We never did find out who threw the stones at us. On such occasions we remembered Lakhubaap because had he been alive, he would have stopped the stones with black magic.

Lakhubaap was a very queer person. He disliked sharing his food with anyone. If it happened to be mutton, before he crushed a plateful of bhakaris in its gravy, he would spit all over his plate so that no one would want to take a share of his meal. Then Lakhubaap relaxed and ate his fill.

Opposite Parshya's house was Kondamai's house. She was a healthy and handsome woman. Her husband, Kerubaap, was a dark-skinned man. Their marriage was not harmonious. It is said that the stink of shit comes from the mouth of a person with inverted intestines. This was the case with Kerubaap. Many times we heard Kondamai shouting and crying in the middle of the night. We were disturbed whenever we heard her cries. On such nights nobody from our Maharwada was able to sleep. There was a rumour that Kerubaap had cheated on Kondamai.

The next day Kondamai came weeping to see my mother. Masamai tried to console her. There were bruises on her fair back. My mother moved her fingers over the scars trying to soothe her. Kondamai went on crying. Her breasts hung like large, hybrid mangoes. Sometimes my mother asked me to pull out her underarm hair but I would rather have removed Kondamai's.

Kondamai used to go with Manakunna. After a few days something

went wrong between them. She deserted Manakunna and started an affair with Damunna, from the lower lane of our Maharwada. This made Manakunna very angry and he threw stones with a sling shot at Kondamai's house. The stones landed all over the place ... on our house or Parshya's, besides Kondamai's. It was followed by a commotion in the Maharwada.

Ambumai was another frequent visitor to our house. She too was having an affair with Kacharuajja, though both were old and grey. This affair between the two old lovers was much talked about among our caste-jury. Ambumai became pregnant despite her age, and the jury forced Kacharuajja to accept her as his wife and compelled him to let her live in his house. Every night Kacharuajja pretended to go for a piss behind the house and came back after sleeping with Ambumai. Kacharuajja's wife had died long ago. People used to tease and humiliate Kacharuajja and he was even fined for his affair with Ambumai. As retribution they asked him to give a feast to the entire Maharwada. And yet despite all attempts Kacharuajja would not accept Ambumai. He was then ostracized from the Maharwada. He was neither allowed to drink water there, nor eat with others. People even stopped talking to him.

Later on Ambumai was exposed. She had lied about being pregnant. Kacharuajja had been double-crossed. He drove her out of the house. One night he went away and returned next morning with a wife young enough to be his daughter.

That morning we went to Chungi to collect the stuff. We wanted to get there before it got too hot. We were given a sample to taste. But I and Harya both got drunk. We also ate chiwda. Then the two of us left the town and set off for home.

Some people can stand their drink but others like me cannot. Drink loosens my tongue, and sometimes I even vomit. I also become quarrelsome when I am drunk. I really get drunk, so drinking does not suit me, and yet I can't give it up either. As Harya and I reached the plains of Chungi, I stumbled as I walked behind him. We were like two barren plains. I was getting more and more tipsy.

'Harya, you are no doubt my brother, so I am going to open my heart to you. I am not drunk, take note. Maybe you think I am drunk. Tomorrow, when I'm not drunk, you will hear the same words, I won't change.'

Harya walked ahead, leading me. Drinking never made him tipsy; he just went on guffawing. I saw everything clearly when drunk but I couldn't keep my balance. As we got closer to our village I felt better, though I was still tipsy. When we came close to the bungalow, Harya took the path by the river bank. When I saw Bhosale the teacher approaching, I stood where I was.

Once I stole the bhakaris of the Waddars who were crushing stones with their hammers near the bungalow. I just picked up their bhakaris tied in a cloth, and ran home. When I untied the bundle there were a few bhakaris of milo jowar and five or six fried mice on top.

I still recall how I stole Nili's bhakaris once. There was a drought that year. People were living on bhakaris made from the seeds of a type of grass and curry made from yet another type of grass. There was no chance to earn anything. The entire village worked at something meant specially for the drought-affected area. My sisters and I were too young so they wouldn't allow us to work. We were hungry most of the time. Hausamai, Nili's mother, would go out to work leaving behind half a bhakari for Nili, which she ate whenever she was hungry during the day. Greedily we watched her eat that bhakari. That day Nili had gone out to play. I sneaked into Nili's house, opened the chest, and found her bhakari.

I thought of eating the whole of that bhakari and then running away. But what about Nili? There would be nothing left for her. Then I thought I would eat only a piece from it and leave something for Nili. But hunger is a powerful thing. I ate some of that bhakari and put the remaining in the chest. Unawares, I kept eating piece after piece and finished the whole of it. That day Nili was restless with hunger and cried a lot. To this day I remember her weeping.

Bhakari is as large as man. It is as vast as the sky, and bright like the sun. Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is more vast than the seven circles of hell. Man is only as big as a bhakari, and only as big as his hunger. Hunger is more powerful than man. A single stomach is like the whole earth. Hunger seems no bigger than your open palm, but it can swallow the whole world and let out a belch. There would have been no wars if there was no hunger. What about stealing and fighting? If there was no hunger what would have happened to sin and virtue,

heaven and hell, this creation of God? If there was no hunger how could a country, its borders, citizens, parliament, Constitution come into being? The world is born from a stomach, so also the links between mother and father, sister and brother.

Everything looked dismal when it rained. We lay inside the bus stand. This village bus stand had large windows, the front almost open. Its roof was made of tin. The rain dripped in through the holes in the roof and drenched us. The chill wind made us shiver. The rain dripped on us throughout the night. Thunder roared and lightning flashed through the wet village. The nights threatened us as we heard the sound of walls collapsing. We could guess at the ferocity of the rain from the sound of heavy drops thudding on the roof. The water became streams. In the morning we saw water all over, our village looked as if it had had a bath.

Whenever it rained I slept under the bench. Santamai sat shivering in a corner, wrapped in rags. She suffered from rigors. She felt something churn in her stomach. After giving birth to Masamai, Santamai had conceived once again but had had a miscarriage. After that Santamai never became pregnant. In another corner Dada sat, smoking bidies the whole night. Santamai kept cursing the rain and Dada cursed Santamai.

Santamai fasted on Tuesdays and Fridays: Tuesdays in the name of the Goddess Ambabai and Fridays in the name of the Goddess Laxmi. Every Thursday, Dada bathed and visited the temple of Laginshaa. He took me with him. On her fast days Santamai ate only once a day. When Pami cried from sheer hunger Santamai allowed her to suck her dry and shrunken breasts. Pami stopped crying as she nibbled.

Santamai always had a large round kumkum mark on her forehead. She wore a necklace of shells. A corner in our house was reserved for the Goddess Ambabai. Before the image of the goddess was placed a wicker-basket. On a peg in the wall in that corner there always hung a seton where Santamai burned incense. While saying her prayers Santamai prayed with her palms held together and eyes closed. She went out with her basket to collect alms from houses. She started first with her own house and it was I who gave her alms. Next she went to Housamai's house. She would stand in front of the house, announce her arrival

and then loudly ask for alms. At some houses she received flour, at others they gave her bhakaris. Soon her basket would be full of eatables. In the small container for oil some people would put coins. I prostrated myself before Santamai when she returned after her round. Santamai smeared her own forehead with Ambabai's kumkum, hoping the goddess would bless her. She handed over the full basket to Masamai. By the time Santamai returned home she would be really tired from seeking alms. I gave her water to drink, which she gulped down quickly.

Santamai would then sort out the things jumbled up in the basket. She first sieved the flour. Masamai moved the baby she was feeding to her other breast. Next she put the child in her lap and squatted down to sort out the things in the basket. We were given pieces of bhakari. If I happened to come across a fresh piece of bhakari I gave it to my mother, hoping she might then have more milk for the baby. If we found a piece of chapati we broke it into smaller pieces and shared it among ourselves.

On Dasera day people gave us so much by way of alms that we had a basketful of goodies. They sacrificed a rooster to the Goddess Ambabai. Santamai fasted on the preceding nine days. On Dasera day she went around the village with her basket for alms. The basket of a Mang enjoys some prestige. Arjya or Jenthigya went round with their own baskets. Even my small sister Nirmi went around with a basket. The food we collected as alms was dried and preserved. We ate it for days afterwards.

In all, five such baskets were taken around the village. Each beggar had his or her own lane. Finally we all met and pooled the alms we had collected. Then we shared everything. If Nirmi came across anything nice she ate it at once. Women brought baskets full of alms without eating anything from it, but Nirmi's basket was always lighter as she ate many things from it. This angered the other four women who didn't allow her to join them while going round for alms.

Harya was a very dark and ugly boy. He was desperately infatuated with a girl named Shobhi, of the Wani caste, who was fair and good looking. The whole village knew that we were Mahars. Santamai swept the village streets, went around begging, massaged the bulging stomachs

of pregnant women and also worked as a midwife. Dada lit the street lamps, worked as a porter, distributed newspapers, went to school carrying tiffin for the pupils—a drunkard who would lie anywhere. Everyone knew us for what we were. Parshya would tease Harya saying, 'Haricha rung Pahuni Radha jhali dang' (Radha was fascinated the moment she saw Hari, though he was dark). That really annoyed Harya.

Once somebody's buffalo calf died. Harya had gone to fetch the carcass as his family was given the contract. While carrying the carcass on his shoulder Harya saw Shobhi approaching. He slowed down and dragged himself along like a reluctant victim. Shobhi held her nose to avoid the stink when they passed each other. She was probably sickened by it. Harya felt sad, embarrassed, and annoyed; he felt like throwing away the burden from his shoulder and walking upright, proudly. What sort of a life was this? Drag dead animals, skin them, and then eat their flesh. For the first time Harya felt hurt and hated his lowly work.

I wanted some animal hide for my drum. Harya was busy skinning the calf, but he looked annoyed at what had just happened. His eyes were full of tears and he didn't speak a single word. His eyes resembled the eyes of the dead animal we were skinning. Harya picked up the hide and went away. We continued with our work of sorting out the animal's parts. Dogs had gathered round. We cut off the animal's heart and gave it to Santamai. Meanwhile Keramai arrived with her vessel. 'Sharanu, give me the tongue of that animal. My husband isn't well. He craves tasty morsels, though he has no appetite.'

I went to the community hall, where the hide of an ox was hung like a blanket to dry. It was deliberately soiled to prevent kites and vultures from pecking at it. Seated under a tree Harya was guarding it against dogs.

Shobhi was walking to her fields. She had to pass by our community hall. When I told Harya that she was approaching, he got up and disappeared. To me Harya seemed just like a hide. He neither smiled nor sang a song. For many days after the incident Harya wouldn't raise his eyes to meet Shobhi's when she passed by.

When Shobhi got married I saw Harya sweeping the wedding tent. During the marriage procession he carried a gas lamp on his shoulder. When Shobhi went away to her new house after the marriage, I saw

Harya hanging restlessly around the bus stand like a bitch about to whelp searching for the right place.

Harya was going home after seeing Shobhi off. If someone had destroyed a honeycomb to snatch the honey from it, and the swarm of bees fleeing the honeycomb were in search of another spot where they could build a new one—that's how he felt.

We had seen many young brides going away after their weddings. We had also seen our village girls returning to the very same bus stand when they were pregnant. They would come with their bulging stomachs. From this same bus stand Shewanta had gone away with her husband. At that time the entire Maharwada had gathered at the bus stand. Shewanta, had hugged everyone, and wept and wept. Shewanta and I too wanted to cry in each other's arms. I wished Shewanta's husband would die so that I could marry her. Shewanta touched the feet of all the elderly people. Before this day I used to wait for the bus to come and go away, but on that day I didn't want the bus to arrive, because it was to take Shewanta away.

But at last the bus did arrive and Shewanta went away. Shadows had fallen from the slanting sun. Shewanta used to say to me, 'I am meant only for you. I will either marry you or drown myself in a well.'

Shewanta went away in the bus. I continued to stand there. It was like standing by the road of life, and life itself seemed to be a porter's job. Each day came like an empty bus. Your life has meaning only when you live for someone.

That day we were going to Kaka's mansion as his father was ill. Masamai got up very early and had her bath. She tidied me up and Nagi. We were excited because we were going to Kaka's mansion. We would be meeting Kaka's parents, his wife and children. We were also visiting his mansion as guests. My mother felt as if she was going to her husband's house for the first time like a bride after her wedding.

In a room at the entrance, Kaka's old father Sidram was sleeping. We didn't know what ailed him. Masamai bent down to touch the old man's feet as if she were his daughter-in-law. The old man muttered something between bouts of coughing. My mother, Nagi, and I sat on

the other side of the room. Taramai sat somewhere inside the house smoking bidies. Kalunna was busy eating. Kaka's wife Kashibai stared at us. Kaka hid somewhere inside the house.

Obviously, Kaka's mansion and our hut could not be compared. Why did Kaka keep visiting us when he had such a mansion? If Nagi, my sister, and my mother were dressed properly they would look smart too. My mother would look as good as a Patil's wife.

Are we ever going to be lucky enough to wear good clothes and have nice food to eat? What immoral link did we have with this mansion? In what way are we connected to the heritage of this mansion? Where do we stand in the line of this Patil caste? We were born to a Patil and yet we couldn't claim to belong to this mansion. Why doesn't this mansion accept us? Why is this mansion dumb? Why are its jaws locked? Why is its tongue tied?

Kaka's wife made tea for us but she kept frowning at us all the while to show her dislike for us. She poured some tea in a vessel. I couldn't lift it as my hands were trembling. My small mouth couldn't accommodate the thick edge of the vessel. So it was difficult for me to drink the tea from it. Somehow I managed to drink some. My mother was given tea in another vessel. Nagi was crying for tea, but how would she, such a baby, drink from that vessel?

Masamai was lucky enough to get tea at least at Kaka's mansion. We too were lucky to just enter that house, Masamai could bend down to touch the feet of Kaka's father, and the Patil's wife herself made tea for us. Masamai felt uplifted by all this. She went about excitedly narrating all this to everyone. I still remember the following incident she told us.

There was a Mahar woman. One day, she tidied herself to go to the market. She had combed her hair, but as there was no coconut oil to put on it, she applied animal fat instead, parted and arranged her hair and went to the market. The fat in her hair attracted flies, which kept hovering over her head. Everyone looked at her as if she were a strange creature. She was a funny sight, going around shopping with a cloud of flies hovering over her head. Even the Patil of that village kept staring at her. The Mahar woman thought that the Patil was infatuated with her. The Mahar woman's vanity was tickled.

That night the Mahar woman didn't go home. Instead, she went to the

Patil, whose wife gave her leftover food to eat. Then she slept in front of the Patil's house. She was hoping that the Patil would come to her that night and wake her up. Instead, the Patil's dog sniffed at her head and started pulling at the knot of her hair. The Mahar woman thought it was the Patil so she kept mumbling in her sleep, 'Oh, Patil this is just why I have come.'

Masamai used to send me and Nagi to the Patil to call him whenever she wanted to see him. As he was usually surrounded by people, we would worry about how to pass on our mother's message. Our mother taught us a trick. She asked us to sneak away Kaka's chappals. We said yes and tried to do what she suggested at least three or four times, but didn't really dare. If Kaka didn't turn up, mother didn't eat anything the whole day. She kept waiting for him. Sometimes Kaka wouldn't turn up for days and our mother would get anxious. She wondered if Kaka had deserted her.

Kaka was afraid of even entering our Maharwada. He was worried what the Maharwada would think of his visits. So whenever he came he brought a couple of companions with him like bodyguards. When visiting alone, he brought a gun with him. Then Kaka would try to appease my mother by making excuses. He said he had to manage so many affairs. Then they would both laugh and make up.

Kaka never felt at home in our house. Mother was scared of Kaka because she had given birth to six daughters, never a son. Mother always looked forward to bearing a son. At last she had one. When she did have one she began to quarrel with Kaka, demanding some share of his property for the son. Kaka began avoiding her. Mother would demand, 'What will happen to my son after you die? Give me some share in your property. It is because of you I have borne seven children.'

When mother quarrelled, Kaka wouldn't turn up for the next few days; he went to Jani instead. Jani was Kaka's first keep. By caste she was a Gondhali. Kaka performed the rituals of purifying her from her caste. He strung a linga in her necklace. All this was performed by a guru. Since her conversion she has lived like an ascetic, chanting mantras much of the time. That's why mother would become restless if Kaka didn't turn up for a few days.

Once Masamai entered Jani's house and had a fight with her. On

another occasion Masamai was about to go to Bombay to make a living. If Kamalakka had not persuaded her and brought us back, perhaps we would have become pimps for our mother. At last Kaka yielded and transferred two acres of land to mother.

Santamai worked as a midwife as well. Whenever a woman had labour pains, she was sent for. She would be paid some titbits for her work. People would come even at one or two o' clock in the night to call her. She would get up ungrudgingly and attend to her duty as a midwife. Sometimes she was busy the whole night. In the morning I felt like an orphan if she wasn't around.

Santamai massaged the bulging stomach of the pregnant woman with oil. If the baby was not in the right position in the womb, she corrected it. She slid her hand inside, held the head of the baby and pulled it out. They wouldn't let me watch because I was a boy. After the delivery, they gave Santamai some grain and a little money for bangles and a blouse piece according to the custom.

On returning home I would hand Santamai a basket into which she poured the grain tied in the pouch of her sari. She wouldn't let anyone touch her. Before entering the house she would have already smashed the bangles on her wrists, as was the custom. Masamai boiled water for her bath. When the water was hot enough she had her bath. There were two aluminium wristlets that Santamai always wore. She had to smash her glass bangles every time she returned from a delivery.

I was eating when the news of Santamai's husband's death reached us. Santamai started weeping loudly. Her husband had actually married another woman and Santamai had been discarded as soon as that second wife became pregnant. Yet when Santamai heard of her husband's death she broke down and almost went into shock. When Masamai returned home she too joined in the weeping. Nagi and Nirmi too began to cry.

When this news arrived, Dada was at the bus stand, busy with his job as a porter. He rushed home as soon as he heard and handed over

whatever money he had earned since morning. Santamai left instantly, by the first available bus, to attend her husband's cremation.

That evening Dada brought some rice, which we cooked and ate. Dada didn't drink that night. He slept, drawing me close. I felt as if Dada was my real father, though we happened to be of different religions. Dada was in no way a relative from either my father's or my mother's side. And yet I felt that somehow we were of the same flesh and blood. Dada's affection did not smell of his religion.

Santamai returned in a few days after the period of mourning. Dada offered her a cup of tea as soon as she stepped off the bus. Basumama, the son of her husband's second wife had come with her. He worked as a teacher in a village called Para. Santamai had brought Basumama along with her because that was the custom.

Santamai told Dada not to come home as long as Basumama was there, so Dada stayed at the stand. When Basumama was out, Dada sneaked in and had his food. Once Basumama came back when Dada was eating. Dada felt guilty and Santamai went pale. Basumama asked rather rudely, 'Who is this man?' Santamai replied, 'Someone we know. He has no one. He stays with us and works as a porter. He is a stranger.' Dada left without finishing his food.

Our village school had classes only up to the seventh form, so when I finished my seventh form, I had to go to a high school in the neighbouring village Chungi. We were supposed to apply for a freeship when we entered high school. The application form was to be signed by my parents and the sarpanch. All this while whenever it was required I used to put my own thumb impression in place of my parent's signature. Getting the signature of the sarpanch was always a problem. Also, all this while, I had named my mother as my guardian because Masamai was not married to Hanmanta, and I couldn't very well enter his name, though I was born of their relationship.

Hanmanta had been responsible for wrecking Masamai's married life. It was because of him that Masamai was divorced and since then she had been Hanmanta's keep. This is almost a tradition—a Patil, always a big landowner, has a Dalit woman as his whore. There is at least one

such house in every village. Children born to such a whore have no legal father because there is an unbridgeable gap between such a father and son. The prestige of the father is at stake!

I never wanted 'Masamai Hanmanta Limbale' named as my guardian in the official record, obviously, because Hanmanta had deserted Masamai these last eight or ten years. Now Masamai was kept by another Patil. What sort of life had she been living, mortgaging herself to one owner after another and being used as a commodity? Her lot has been nothing but the tyranny of sex.

I went to the sarpanch with seven or eight other boys for his signature on freeship application forms. The village chief signed everyone's form, except mine. I was annoyed. Bhosale guruji arrived at the same time. They talked over the matter for some time. Bhosale guruji tried to convince the sarpanch of the merit of my case and recommended that he sign my form, but to no avail. The sarpanch refused to sign because he was confused about who Masamai's real husband, my father, was. He said, 'I don't approve the name Masamai Hanmanta Limbale.' Obviously he was on the Patil's side and concerned about his prestige. After all, the Patil was a powerful man. Bhosale guruji then proposed my granny's name, 'Santamai Rama Balshankar,' but the sarpanch refused because he knew that my grandmother was living with a Muslim, whose name was Mahmood and whom we called Dada. The sarpanch was in a real fix about how to identify me. But I too was a human being. What else did I have except a human body? But a man is recognized in this world by his religion, caste, or his father. I had neither a father's name, nor any religion, nor a caste. I had no inherited identity at all.

The sarpanch eventually signed my freeship somehow, because of Bhosale guruji. I was annoyed at what had happened. Can everybody guarantee that he is the offspring of the father whose name is added to his name? Has anyone seen who sowed his seed? Has anyone seen the intercourse of his parents that resulted in his birth?

When I returned home, Masamai was squatting at the entrance. I started crying the moment I saw her. The humiliation I had faced was intolerable. My mother tried to console me with kisses. We embraced like two meteors clashing. The next day while submitting my application form, our class teacher asked me, 'Don't you have a father?' I replied,

'He is dead.' He asked next, 'What about your mother?' I replied, 'She too is dead.' The boys from my village, who knew it wasn't true, stared at me like vultures. The classroom fell dead silent like the calm after a big storm. But I was swinging like a snapped kite in the storm that went on tossing in my mind.

I used to ask my mother about my father: What was his name? Where did he live? What did he do? Why didn't he come to me? What was my relationship with Kaka? What was the relationship between Kaka and my mother? Who was Nagi and Nirmi's father? What was my relationship with Nagi and Nirmi? And so on.

Instead of answering me, my mother clammed up like Kunti. At such moments I felt a kinship with Karna. I felt we were brothers. Many times I felt I was Karna myself because, like him, I too was drifting with the flow of the river. My mother asked me to tell my teacher that she was the Patil's whore. This made me very happy and I thought that the next day I would certainly tell my teacher. I didn't know the meaning of the word 'whore', I thought it meant 'father'. But what a venomous word it is. It implies an impure, foul vagina. Who would willingly enter the gigantic gate of that vagina?

In the month of Shrawan a week's festival is observed for God Mahadev. Singers of devotional songs would gather from the surrounding villages for this festival. On the last day of this week-long festival the temple would be painted and decorated. Banana plants, branches of the coconut tree, buntings, a colourful tent and loudspeaker made the temple premises lively and busy. People came from Baslegaon too. Hanmanta was one of the singers in the group.

On this day my mother would bathe me and powder my face to make me look smart. I put on clean clothes. I approached the group of singers. Who in this group could be my father? Even if he was there I wouldn't recognize him and my father won't recognize me, even if he knew that I was his offspring. This really hurt me.

Every year Hanmanta visited Hanoor with this group of singers. I clearly recall the night I first saw my father. Once Kaka brought Hanmanta along to dine with us. Kaka was the Patil of Hanoor and

Hanmanta the Patil of Baslegaon. My mother was once the keep of Hanmanta, whose son I am, and at present she is Kaka's kept woman. My mother had made egg curry for them. Both Kaka and Hanmanta were drunk. I was woken up from my sleep and handed over to Hanmanta. He made me sit in his lap. He was stinking of liquor. I kept looking at him. Then my mother served the food and they began eating. Once in a while Hanmanta put a morsel in my mouth. I ate, though I was half-asleep. I was excited that I had found my father at last. No one would humiliate me, now that he had come. Tomorrow I would show him to my friends.

But something went wrong, as Kaka and my mother started a fierce quarrel. My mother cursed and abused Kaka, and drove him out of our house. She held a chappal in her hand and meant to hit Kaka with it. I couldn't make out what was wrong. I was angry with my mother because she was quarrelling with my father who had come to me for the first time, and maybe after a long time to her. My mother was too bitter. She drove both Kaka and Hanmanta out of the house. That night she hugged me as she slept and cried a lot. Her sobbing was like the explosion of a volcano. Her tears suggested that doomsday was close.

After some time both Kaka and Hanmanta came back. They knocked at the door, but my mother didn't open it. She kept shouting, 'If you two don't go away instantly I will burn myself.' My mother was trembling with rage. I was on the verge of tears.

It took quite some time for me to know why my mother was so angry—Kaka was persuading my mother to sleep with Hanmanta.

In the month of Shrawan some people from our village read the holy scriptures in the temple of Ithoba. The entire village was present to hear the recital. I was a very unpredictable lad. One day, Parshya and I entered the temple of Ithoba and prostrated directly before the god. Then we immediately returned home. Parshya's father, who was sitting at the stairs near the entrance of the temple and listening to the recital, saw what we had done. He didn't like our rebellious behaviour and thrashed Parshya very badly when we returned home. He warned Parshya to give up my company.

He kept shouting, 'I want to live in this village. Why do you boys behave like this? The village will humiliate me some day because of

your behaviour. No one has ever slandered me for anything. I will break your leg if you behave like this again.' He was really angry, because entering a temple is a crime. We were supposed to say our prayers from the steps outside. Our entering a temple will make God impure. We were expected to behave responsibly. The untouchables must not enter a temple.

God discriminates between man and man. He makes one man rich and the other poor. One is high caste, the other untouchable. What kind of God is this that makes human beings hate each other? We are all supposed to be the children of God, then why are we considered untouchable? We don't approve of this God, nor this religion, nor this country because they ostracize us.

Why are we ostracized? Why are we kept away from other human beings? Why are we kept out of our own selves? Why this discrimination between one human being and another? After all, isn't everybody's blood red?

I was scared of Shrimantanna because he always spoke harshly to me, and I obeyed him out of fear. Once he asked me to fetch bidies for him. When I refused, he became very angry and holding me tightly by my neck called me 'son of a bitch'. He drove me away from the community hall shouting, 'This is not your father's community hall. If you come back here I will break your neck. Your father lives in Baslegaon, so you have nothing to do with this village.'

After this event I didn't go to the community hall for a few days. Had I gone, someone might have smacked or abused me. I am an alien. My father is not Mahar by caste. In the Maharwada I felt humiliated as I was considered a bastard; they called me akkarmashi. Yet in the village I was considered Mahar and teased as the offspring of one.

Suppose I go to Baslegaon would my father allow me into his house? Would the mother there give me food? My father lives in a mansion, my mother in a hut, and I on the street. Where will I die? Where are my roots exactly?

One day Suni had gone to gather wood for fuel. She had to gather it from odd nooks where there might well have been scorpions and other poisonous creatures. The fear of death was a routine thing, but we couldn't afford to be scared away. That day the thorn of a toddy palm tree pricked Suni. The wound on her hand was very deep, so it swelled. She was wriggling like a fish out of water. Many girls had gathered round her.

Some shepherd boys and women removed the thorn. Suni was crying in agony. I couldn't stand her pain so I too started to cry, and Vani too joined me. The women tried to comfort us.

When my mother returned home she said, 'The fathers of my children may be different but they are all born of me. My blood is common to all of them, so they cannot stand each other's suffering. This boy suffered to see his sister in agony.'

Though our fathers were different I never felt different from my sisters; I even used to crush lice on their heads. I used to brush their hair and plait it. We did quarrel, but that was only while we were playing. Sometimes when Nagi got annoyed with me, she abused me, 'You have no connection with us. Nobody knows where you come from. Our fathers are not the same,' hearing which I cracked within and without. I burned within. Nagi's words pierced my heart. The feeling of alienation weighed heavily on my mind.

Whenever Dada was angry with me, I too got wild. I insulted him saying, 'You are a Muslim. You are not my father, so don't you dare hit me.' Dada would lower the hand he had raised to hit me. I stood like a cactus plant. I used to abuse Kaka as well, who hit me when my mother told him of my behaviour. I boldly told him, 'Patil you are in no way concerned with me. You can't touch me.' I felt I would explode with wild rage. I used to escape if anyone tried to hit me. On such occasions I longed intensely for Baslegaon.

My so-called father belonged to Baslegaon. What kind of place was Baslegaon, my fatherland? What sort of people were they? What were my relatives there like? What were my brothers and sisters like? What was my home there like? Should I go there in search of my roots? How many days would it take? Would my father recognize me? I was always curious about Baslegaon. On many occasions I nearly set

off, but was scared of leaving. If I went there I knew I would be finished.

If a baby sparrow falls out of its nest and is handled by a human being, it is not allowed to return to its nest but is pecked to death—crying all the while—by its own parents and kin. If I went to Baslegaon my plight would be like that bird's. I am born of a Mahar woman. How would they let me enter their house? They will torture me to death. I would turn back with such thoughts. I never did get as far as Baslegaon. When I entered the house, Kaka, my mother and Dada behaved as if I was a stranger. Kaka said to Dada, 'Why do you look after Sharnya? Whose offspring is he? Let him go away if he wants to, or drive him away.' Dada too seemed to agree, but then said, 'I have looked after him for Santamai's sake.' I felt like the sparrow who suffers because its nest is destroyed. Who should I go to? Who would claim me when both my mother and father rejected me?

Why didn't my mother abort me when I was a foetus? Why did she not strangle me as soon as I was born? We may be children born out of caste but does that mean we must be humiliated? What exactly is our fault? Why should a child suffer for the sin of its parents?

So whenever I look at my mother I grow wild with anger. Why did she commit adultery at all?

Why shouldn't I enter my mother's bed? Isn't she an adulteress? But whenever I look at my mother and Santamai my throat constricts. Masamai and Santamai are not the only examples. They sold themselves to be loved and cared for by someone. They hadn't sold their bodies to appease their lust. Do we exist just for the sake of that hunger? Beyond hunger lies a vast life. There *is* life beyond bread. And yet I had no experience of life beyond this ghetto.

Our villagers have provided us with bread so we owe much to them. They did provide bread but in exchange satisfied their lust with our women. I can't bear to think of Masamai caught between bread and lust. Who will rescue my mother? She will die blemished, an object of someone's lust, but what about us? Will anyone marry my sisters? I am a man, so even if nobody marries me I can find relief with a whore, but what about my sisters? Will society accept us? When we die will people from the Maharwada undertake our funeral? Are my sisters going to rot like this? They say that every human being is born with his or her match.

If so, where are their bridegrooms? Or are they going to be victims like my mother? If there had been no brother-sister relationship I would have married one of my sisters consumed by the fire of her desire. I would have made at least one of them happy.

I never got real love from my mother, so she was not my mother in the true sense. Half of her was my mother and the other half a woman for that Patil. She had to satisfy the Patil. Her milk meant for me went dry even as her arms were busy embracing the Patil. My mother was snatched away from me. In this cycle of destiny if she chanced to pat me on my back, that mere touch revived me. Who wrenched my mother away from me? Why was she sterile for me?

We used to roam along the stream to reduce the fire of hunger in our stomachs. We caught crabs, fish, eggs, smashed a honeycomb, caught birds, cried like water-fowls, tied frogs around our necks, searched for lizards, shot pebbles at kites with catapults, roasted squirrels and ate them. We went to the fields and felled the leaves and fruits from trees. We broke the ant-hill and ate the queen ant. Umbrya, Parshya and I broke the trunks of trees, particularly the toddy palm, for their pith. We did all this to satisfy our hunger. We used to hide ourselves in fear of the farmers. When Umbrya was busy breaking the trunk of a tree for the pith, Parshya and I sorted out the leaves and branches. When Umbrya was tired it was Parshya who continued the job of cutting down the trunk. After Parshya it was my turn. We took turns hacking at the trunk. We brought the tree down by pulling its branches. Once we were nearly through, we shook the tree vigorously so that it would fall quickly. As it fell its thorns pricked and bruised us.

There was a gambolana tree at the river bank further down Girmallya's field. We cut the toddy palm tree for its pith. It tasted like coconut. Its fresh leaves stirred a strong desire to eat the pith from its roots. We used to roast pigs under that tree.

Manakunna owned a herd of pigs. Men, women, and children used to shit everywhere in the open. Pigs survived on human shit. These pigs didn't even let us shit properly. They came when we sat down to shit and brushed their noses against our bottoms. Both flies and

pigs annoyed us. Harya used to gather pig-dropping for manure and Manakunna sold the fat from animals.

Manakunna would stand with a noose in his hand. We drove the pigs towards him. They tried to escape, running this way and that. Shitting women, who were disturbed, abused us. We trod on lumps of shit. We too shrieked like pigs. When a pig was caught in the noose it shrieked horribly. Children from the Maharwada gathered at the scene. Manakunna tied the captured pig's legs and Harya then removed its testicles.

Manakunna killed a pig once in a month or two. A pig hunt meant great excitement with a lot of commotion. Harya would leap after the pigs. Umbrya ran after them with a stick in his hand. Parshya tracked them with his dog on the leash. Harya followed them with stones in his hand. Manakunna and Harya also ordered their dogs to chase the pigs. We were the last ones to run after the hunters.

Harya was a powerful stone thrower. He was so strong that he could flatten a pig with a single stone. Then dogs jumped at the stumbling victim. We too ran towards that pig, as it struggled to escape. Harya hoisted the pig onto his shoulders and started back. On the way back we gathered twigs for fuel. Manakunna fetched salt and chilli. Manakunna was the last one to arrive.

Harya's single stone shot on the neck was enough to kill a pig. The creature first fell down shrieking and wriggling, and then, lay still. Harya and Parshya roasted the pig. As the pig was being roasted, its fat burned making a hissing sound. When the roasting was complete Manakunna scrubbed the pig, then removed its intestines.

We were not allowed to enter our homes unless we had a bath after eating pork. Manakunna sat relaxed in the community hall, picking his teeth. I thought how these pigs eat human shit, they run around to save their lives, they fall down when hit with a stone, they struggle and fight to save their lives, they die with their feet tied up, they are roasted, their eyes fall out when they are roasted. Then, my mouth, teeth, throat, stomach, intestines, blood, my whole self nauseated me.

Manakunna used to send me away to fetch bidies. I obeyed him to ensure I got pork the next time also.

But Manakunna always took great care of any sow particularly if she happened to be pregnant. He would make an enclosure for her in the

backyard of his hut. As a habit sows eat a piglet from the litter. Such occasions reminded me of Devki's story. Masamai used to say, 'I didn't kill you after your birth. Instead I nursed you.' She then went on to tell Devki's story.

Devki, a spinster, worked on Girmallya's farm. She was unmarried as well as very poor. Her occupation was performing abortions. Women who were pregnant but didn't want a child came to her for help. After all, one's prestige is more precious than life.

Devki made the pregnant woman lie flat on her stomach and then walked heavily all over her. She also gave the woman some herbs to eat to help her abort. Then one day Devki found that she herself was pregnant. She gave birth to a child early one morning. Before sunrise she buried the baby under the garbage. I could see the resemblance between a sow eating her own piglet and Devki.

Dhanavva, a woman from our village, visited Devki quite frequently. Dhanavva was Shankar's young and beautiful daughter. Her husband had been struck dead by lightning, and she was now living with her father, a rascal. She was his eldest daughter. Getting her remarried was a big problem. Now pregnant by her own father, Dhanavva kept visiting Devki. She begged Devki to abort her. It was rather late for an abortion because Dhanavva had kept it a secret all this while. Shankar, her father said, 'I have sown the seed from which she has grown as a plant. Now why shouldn't I eat the fruits of this plant?'

Father and daughter, plant and fruit, conception. I saw Dhanavva passing by our house every day. Sometimes she visited my mother and cried a lot.

We used to go to the river to catch fish. Sometimes we caught fish in a sari, at other times in a bowl or a vessel. Sometimes we made puddles in the sand, then removed the water and caught the fish. We were bored of angling for fish. At night we cut the fish in the light of a bonfire made with discarded tyres. During summer when the river shrank, there were small puddles instead of the flowing water. We then stuffed the puddles with the branches and leaves of the sher plant. The sap of the sher plant is poisonous so with it the water in the puddles too became poisoned.

One by one the fish died, wriggling before they fell quiet. Then they floated to the surface. The dead fish sparkled like silver. Our hands stank from gathering the dead fish. We also killed fish by smashing them on a rock where they bled at the fins before dying.

Each one of us had his share of fish. We scrubbed them, split their bellies, removed the intestines, faeces, and balloon-like sacs from inside their bodies. We threw all the waste into the river where it floated. Live fish from the river rushed to devour it. The smell attracted snakes and crabs to the spot.

After fishing we gathered on the river bank. I fetched a vessel and oil, Harya brought chilli powder, and Parshya onions and a matchbox. Umbrya gathered twigs for fuel. We prepared fish soup and enjoyed it. All the while we also smoked the butts of cigarettes and bidies that we had gathered.

Here is the story of Masamai's husband. It happened late one afternoon. Damunna came to our house carrying Ithal Kamble on his back. We arranged a bed for him in the inside room.

Ithal Kamble and Masamai were probably seeing each other after ages. It was the same Ithal Kamble, Masamai's ex-husband, who had not only divorced and discarded her, but had also snatched away her suckling baby. He had driven Masamai away from his house and married another woman. He was the father of many children. So many years had gone by since then. Why then should he come to a deserted wife when he was about to die? Why did he wrong Masamai? Why do families get disrupted like this? What sort of game goes on between life and death?

Ithal Kamble married for the second time. He went from place to place to earn a living. People said that he was poisoned, or perhaps somebody had done black magic. He was given every possible treatment. Both doctors and prayers were tried. But nothing cured him. Some people said he was suffering because of Masamai's curse, because he had humiliated her. Now he had come to Masamai before dying to atone for the wrongs he had done her. Masamai took a vow to save her husband. Every day she massaged him regularly, bathed him in hot water, made him eat well. She nursed him wholeheartedly and with the greatest

devotion. She didn't let the bitter past affect her present devotion. Santamai took a pledge before God for her husband. Every day Kaka came and tried to comfort us. He sat talking to us for some time and then went away. Other people too visited us to see Ithal Kamble and speak encouraging words to us. But in the end everyone was tired of this.

Bhangaryava, Masamai's mother-in-law, too, came to us. She cried all the time. We therefore gathered round her to console her. She said in plaintive tone, 'All of you should have, in fact, been born in my house. Had that happened my house would have been really complete. It is all disrupted because I was vulnerable to people's gossip. I am responsible for the whole trouble. I am the culprit.' Ithal Kamble stared at us blankly and helplessly.

If Ithal Kamble died in our house it would be a problem, so he was moved back to Baslegaon.

On the third day we got the news of Kamble's death. Just the day before we had heard a lapwing shrieking as it flew over our house. This was considered a bad omen. Today it turned out that it had been true. Santamai left instantly to attend the cremation. For her bus fare Dada gave all the money he had collected from his labour. Masamai didn't eat anything and wept all the while. Dada tried to console her. Kaka too came in with a sad face. Nagi and I kept telling each other, 'Our mother's husband has died.'

Santamai came back after the cremation and said everything went off well. Everyone was expecting Masamai to attend the cremation. After the death rites they found the imprint of a cow's hoof on the flour beneath the lamp that was kept at the spot where the dead body had been placed before it was taken for cremation. So they said he was reborn as a cow. At last Ithal Kamble was one with the soil. One restless life was gone like blood gushing from a wound. His sons Suryakant and Dharma were now fatherless.

Didn't our mother ever think of Suryakant and Dharma who were her own sons born of Ithal Kamble, her husband? The thought of changing one's home because one's life had turned upside down must be painful. Masamai had given birth to Suryakant and Dharma, and had also nursed them. They had played in her arms. She had kissed them innumerable times. But today how has she forgotten them? Even a small wound

leaves a scar forever. Didn't Suryakant and Dharma ever remember their mother, Masamai? How could they live without their mother? Didn't they ever wish to see their mother? We always play around our mother and if she isn't there we get restless. We can't think of being without our mother. Whenever our mother prepares to go out we cry and demand that she take us with her. Sometimes she punishes us but she also loves us a lot. Is there any woman whom Suryakant and Dharma claim as their mother? Who got them ready to go to school? Was there anyone to listen to their stubborn demands? Did they know what a mother means at all? Do their classmates tease them for not having a mother? What a pleasure it was when Nagi, Nirmi, and I played, watched fondly by our mother!

One day we were playing and our mother was seated at the door, when Bhangaryava arrived. We were happy that our grandmother was visiting us. We stopped playing. Masamai too got up hurriedly. Bhangaryava was accompanied by two men. She said, 'These two are your sons, Suryakant and Dharma.' Masamai was overwhelmed. She started crying and embracing them both. When Masamai was separated by divorce from her two sons, Dharma was still a suckling infant and Suryakant was only four years old. Now they were both grown-up. Time had stretched forwards and backwards. After how many years were the mother and her two sons meeting? Masamai went on kissing Suryakant and Dharma, and I was envious. Why did Masamai love these strangers so much? Had her love for us withered?

Suryakant, Dharma, Nagi, Nirmi, Vani, and I were all born to the same mother. We were conceived in the same womb and had come from the same blood. But how like strangers we were!

Parshya and I were on our way to pluck the fruits of a toddy palm. We saw Shobhi approaching. She was carrying a vessel of water on her head. Parshya and I were walking. As it was a narrow path Shobhi asked us to stay clear and let her pass. She got angry when Parshya started arguing. She said, 'Mahars have become bold these days. They now dare to walk straight up to you. Can't you see I am carrying drinking water? Your touch will make it impure.'

We gave in and let her go, though her insulting words had angered us. We felt offended. We knew Shobhi went to her farm every day. One

day we planned our revenge. We decided to obstruct her on her way to her farm. Though this plan scared me, Shobhi *had* also insulted us many times in school.

That afternoon nobody was around. Only two children were playing at some distance from the spot where we had planned to obstruct Shobhi. Soon we saw her approaching. She was walking over the rocky ground, carrying a bundle of food on her head. Parshya stood in her way and gripped her hand. I was scared but the thought of revenge was stronger.

Parshya was saying to her, 'So you call us Mahars, don't you? Your water gets impure if we touch it, if that's so then why doesn't this river turn impure? If a human being becomes impure by our mere touch then why didn't your colour change to green or yellow, as it happens when someone is sick or poisoned? Why didn't the food in your bundle rot? If you consider us Mahars then answer my questions, or we won't let you go.'

Finally Parshya and I had dared to insult Shobhi. In fact we wanted to rape her by way of revenge. Shobhi stood before us as a symbol of the caste system. Her feet, her thighs, her arms, her face—everything was a part of the system she belonged to.

Had anyone seen us insulting Shobhi? What would happen if anyone had seen us? Or if she told people in the village or someone in her house when she went back? What would the fate of our sisters be now? How would the village and our Maharwada react to this? I recalled the story Damunna once told us.

Once a Dalit youth dared to look lasciviously at a high-caste woman from the village. This was considered a serious crime. Suppose she went back and told the people in her house? The whole village turned against the young man and attacked the Maharwada. Later the whole village went to court against young Dalit men who were sentenced to prison for a year. When they returned after serving their term, every man's wife had had a baby. The Dalit women had been raped when their husbands were in prison. A village always acts atrociously like this against the Dalits. We didn't know in which village this had happened, but whenever we heard this, it disturbed us.

Masamai stayed home most of the time. Whenever she was hungry she only drank tea. Once in three months Kaka received his salary as village chief. He paid for our clothing and provisions. Whenever there was a divorce case in the village Kaka got some extra money. If there was a suicide or a murder he had to report it to the police in the town. If a person had died as a result of some feudal dispute, there was a police inquiry after which the body was handed over to the relatives for cremation. The sergeant, the police inspector, and Kaka as the village chief got money by way of bribes. Whenever we had hard times, Masamai would say, 'Someone should fall in a well and die. Only then may we get something.'

Kaka had transferred a two-acre plot of land to my mother. His income never sufficed as he was responsible for a large family. Masamai kept crying and moaning that she had to starve in spite of being the Patil's woman, that her life was worthless.

Masamai, Nagi, and Nirmi used to bathe openly in our house. They removed their clothes, bathed naked, and changed clothes in our presence. I was doomed to see my mother and my sisters naked. I could see that Nagi had no breasts yet, though they had already fixed her marriage. She wasn't old enough for it.

Kaka spent lavishly on Nagi's marriage. He gave the entire village a feast. The whole Maharwada attended the wedding. Our community council had made a condition that Kaka should give a feast to the whole village as well as to our Maharwada. As Kaka was a Patil, the Mahars didn't exploit him much.

Nagi's husband's name was Kumar. He was a casual labourer at the Narsing Girji Mill. His mother sold bananas on the streets. Kumar had been deserted by two former wives, and Nagi was his third wife. He was rather old for Nagi. It is always difficult to marry off illegitimate children like us. Nagi looked very young but Kumar was old enough to be a father of two. The elders in my house had thoughtlessly married Nagi to Kumar. There is a superstition that a third wife never stays too long with her husband, so they kept a doll in Kumar's pocket to represent the third wife. The rituals of the third marriage were performed prior to the marriage between Nagi and Kumar. Then followed the actual wedding ceremony of Nagi and Kumar. This meant Nagi was Kumar's

fourth wife, and it was hoped that she would stay with him forever.

Very soon though, Nagi left her husband and returned home. She had not even reached puberty. People were also saying that Kumar was impotent. Only God knew the truth.

One day Kumarmama and I had slept on a handcart meant for carrying bananas. It was made of four bicycle wheels and Kumar's mother Shantatya went around hawking bananas on it. Kumarmama had a habit of muttering in his sleep. He stank of liquor. He was also a gambler. He didn't do any work as such for his livelihood after he was sacked from his job in the mill. While we were asleep on the cart, Kumarmama put his leg over me. He embraced me as if I were his woman. I was very innocent. Somehow I managed to escape from his grip.

Next morning Shantatya, who needed the cart, woke us up. I looked at Kumar as he woke up. He had had a wet dream and there was a damp patch on his underwear.

Kumarmama used to drink just a cup of tea in the morning, and then leave to return only late in the evening. Every day he promised to take me to the cinema. I had never been to one. In the afternoon I used to accompany Shantatya, pushing the handcart and selling bananas. By then I was familiar with Sholapur city. It was my first ever visit to a city. While hawking her wares Shantatya shouted, 'Bananas!' Women customers kept inquiring about me and somehow I felt nice about it.

Every day Kumarmama left the house, pretending he was going out to work. Actually, he had been sacked from his work long ago. Nobody knew where he went and what he did the entire day. In his absence his creditors came to his house and kept bothering Shantatya to return the money Kumar had borrowed. Shantatya grew vexed and quarrelled more frequently with the owner of the fruit garden, who kept complaining that his business was in the red and that he had lost credit in the market. One day Shantatya left him, slung a sack over her shoulder, and went gathering junk.

The lives of Kumar and Shantatya were shattered. Unless they gathered junk like broken glass, bits of paper and rags, and sold them, they had no money to buy their food. Kumar earned nothing. One day I accompanied Shantatya on her round to gather junk. I put my hand in the garbage, turned everything upside down, collected bits of paper

or whatever I found and handed it over to Shantatya. Sometimes I found a piece of crumpled paper and when I opened it, hoping for something, there was a lump of shit inside. Whenever I found a piece of candy wrapper, my mouth watered. A clean sheet of paper made me happy. If there was anything interesting to read, I kept reading it and Shantatya shouted, 'What are you reading? Come on, pass it on to me.'

On the one hand there was the garbage, on the other, our hunger. The junk was sold by weight. I felt our hunger should be weighed instead of the junk, then we would know, at least how much it weighed. Perhaps we should weigh not only our hunger and stomachs but ourselves too. Did we weigh at least as much as the rubbish we had gathered during the day?

A story went around that once a drunkard had entered Santamai's bed during the night. He ran away when Santamai began to abuse him. Shantatya said that this happened to her as well on every full moon night. She said it could be a ghost. Such stories puzzled me.

Had Kumarmama entered Santamai's bed? If that was so then could he have been slipping into Shantatya's bed too?

I completed my high school education at Chungi and Chapalgaon. I travelled daily to Chungi from my village but I was sent to a boarding school at Chapalgaon because I had often played truant from the school at Chungi. Skipping school was now not possible at Chapalgaon. I was no longer pampered as I had been at home. I had to stay with other boys from different places. Even my habit of early-morning tea ended when I went to Chapalgaon.

When I was small, Dada's namaz fascinated me. Later, Santamai's prayers to Ambabai or Laxmi fascinated me. I was also moved by Kaka's recital of mantras from the scriptures. But when I shifted to the boarding school at Chapalgaon all those impressions faded slowly. Now there were Dalit boys around me all the time. Buddhism began to cast its spell on me.

I couldn't do anything much while at Chapalgaon except study. While my love for maths and drawing ended, my English improved. I was one of the intelligent boys in my class and moved with the brighter students most of the time.

I had grown up sleeping close to Santamai at nights. So when I went to Chapalgaon for higher education Santamai felt lonely. Once, she walked all the way from home to Chapalgaon just to see me. She had dreamt of me the previous night and missed me. The distance between Hanoor, my village, and Chapalgaon was four miles. The bus fare was sixty paise, which she didn't have. We couldn't afford money like that, so we nearly always walked to and fro.

That day Santamai walked the distance just to see me. She brought me a pair of old chappals. Someone had forgotten them at the Hanoor bus stand and Santamai had found them while sweeping the place. She didn't give the chappals either to Nagi or to Nirmi but to me. The toe strap of one chappal was broken, but they seemed to fit me well enough. When I put them on they looked like ladies' chappals. Then we both walked towards the bus stand.

Santamai asked me to get the broken strap repaired. The cobbler beside the bus stand refused to repair it as he knew Santamai was a Mahar. I put them back on my feet, unrepaired. My friends teased me because I was using ladies' footwear. But they didn't have even that.

Once, when I was in the tenth standard I found thirty rupees. My friend Pirjade had seen me picking up the money. He suggested that we share it. With that we could go to the cinema at Akkalkot. We walked together some distance. I thought about it but couldn't agree. Then he suggested, 'You keep twenty rupees for yourself because you found it and so your claim is greater. You can give me only ten and I will keep my mouth shut.' I didn't like the thought of that either. Just then the school bell rang.

Before our classes started we had to assemble on the school ground to sing the national anthem and take an oath together. While paying this homage all the teachers and students stood in attention. After the prayer I went to our headmaster, told him about the money I had found and handed it over to him. He was very happy with my honesty and announcing my name on the loudspeaker, congratulated me. That year our class had lost in the sports competition. When I entered my class after the headmaster's public congratulation, our teacher, Hiremath, stopped teaching for a while and said, 'This year we have lost in sports, but it hardly matters. The honesty that this boy, Limbale, has shown is

our real victory.' The joy my act of honesty brought me was more precious than those thirty rupees.

We used to come home on weekends and go back to the school on Mondays. During those two days, Saturday and Sunday, we went around the village in a group. We hated the very idea of untouchability. With our education, there grew in us a sense of pride. Casteism made us bitter. There was a small tea shop in our village owned by Shivram, where a separate cup and saucer were kept for the Mahars and Mangs. I had seen the cup and saucer many times. We also had to move aside to make way for high-caste persons while passing on the road. Everywhere we were condemned. Our houses were in places that other villagers used as latrines. We felt no affection for our village. Instead, we were scared and tense. Our caste had been thrust upon us even before we were born.

Those days when we went around the village and walked with pride, the high-caste people hated our confidence. They didn't want us to enjoy any self-esteem. But we had realized that self-esteem had unusual strengths. We loathed the low esteem that was imposed on us as our lot. The cup and the saucer outside Shivram's tea shop were an insult to our entire community. Old people from our community drank tea from that cup and saucer without any protest. Rambaap used to go to Shivram's tea shop and drink tea from it. There was also an aluminium tumbler kept separately for us to drink water from. As we held the tumbler the water was poured into it, carefully, without any contact between us and the giver. Rambaap used to drink water as well as tea and he had to wash the tumblers too before he put them back in their place. He had to put the money for the tea on the ground or drop it from a height into the hands of the owner because for a Mahar or Mang to hand money directly to anyone was a sin. When Rambaap noticed me watching him do all this, he said, 'We are low castes. What you have seen is a long tradition that has come down to us from our forefathers. What can we do about it? How can we go against the village customs?'

But some day we ought to rebel. How long can we mutely suffer all this? How many times are we going to be born and live thus against our wish? Some time we ought to reject all this.

One day Parshya and I decided to make a complaint against Shivram

to the police. We didn't even have enough money to pay Shivram for a cup of tea, because Dada did not earn any wages on that day and yet somehow he managed to give us ten paise. He searched all his pockets and turned them out to show us that he had nothing. He had saved ten paise for his bidies, but when I insisted, he gave me the money. We ran like whirlwinds towards Shivram's shop.

Faimya poured water for us from a height, avoiding contact. Parshya washed the cup and saucer and put the money on the ground. Faimya took the money and poured the tea into the cup, again avoiding contact. We took the cup and saucer, full of tea, directly to the police station. The constable was relaxing, chewing his tobacco, seated. It was our first time in a police station. I was wearing a tattered vest, and a towel around my waist. Parshya, in his father's dhoti and shirt, stood at the door of the police station and asked in English, 'May I come in sir?' I stood behind him, trembling. The constable looked at us, amazed. Perhaps he did not understand what we had said, because he shouted at us, 'What the hell do you want, you sons of bitches?'

We entered. Parshya narrated what had happened and put the cup and saucer of tea before him. The constable looked at us and the tea by turn. To him we and the cup meant the same thing. The constable used to drink tea and eat on credit at Shivram's hotel. He began to threaten us, saying, 'I will put you both in prison.' Nobody from our house had dared to do what we, Parshya and I, were doing. We were scared, our mouths dry, and we began to regret what we had done. After all we were not going to drink tea at the shop every day, so what did it matter? What would happen if this affair came to be known to our people at home? Shivram might even kill us. What will people in our community say?

'If you arrest us, you ought to arrest Shivram too,' I said, almost in tears. Parshya was ready to run away any moment. I didn't know the address of either the chief minister or the prime minister. I didn't even know how to write to them, and yet I said, 'We are going to write to the prime minister.' The constable was startled and alarmed. He called for Shivram. This scared us even more. Shivram was being summoned by the police on our complaint.

When the constable told Shivram everything he was enraged. He

shouted, 'Everyone from the Maharwada has been drinking tea from that cup and saucer for the last twenty years. What have these boys taken into their heads? If I allow them to enter my hotel no other customers will come to me.' Shivram stared at us. Fear locked my mouth and I couldn't utter a word. Shivram called the shop boy and asked for a cup of tea, which he gave Parshya and me in a nice cup and saucer. Then he abused us and said, 'You sons of bitches, come to my house and we will serve you food in my own plate.'

We quietly walked out of the police station. We had decided not to tell anybody about the whole affair. In fact we ourselves wanted to forget the whole thing. Parshya and I walked together towards the Maharwada. By the time we reached there the entire village and Maharwada were united against us for having gone to the police station to complain against Shivram. Kaka arrived home in the evening. He was furious about the whole affair. He shouted, 'Sharanya, who have you complained against at the police station? Why the hell did you need to do that? I will smash your head like I would a snake's.'

I kept quiet. Kaka crawled away like a scorpion. Santamai and I were sitting together when she said, 'Life is not the same. We suffered more injustice in our days.'

Whenever an animal in the village died, the villagers grew annoyed. They considered the Maharwada responsible for it. They tied us to a pole and beat us like animals. They accused us of having poisoned the animal. Our women and children cried and shrieked. All the men in the Maharwada were very badly beaten. The village then ostracized the Maharwada for a few days. We wouldn't get any work on the farms. We were denied any provision at the shops though we had the money and were ready to pay. We had reached a dead end. Such humiliation was agonizing.

When the Maharwada was ostracized, Satubaap used to do odd jobs in the village. During work hours he sneaked out provisions and gave them to the Mahars. If he came across a dead animal he dragged it in single-handed. He tore up the animal, skinned it, and distributed portions of meat to every house. But those were bygone days, everything has changed now.

Santamai's stories of such humiliation used to leave me angry and

impatient. I did not know the reason for such injustice shown towards us by the high-caste villagers. Santamai's words caused me much anguish. I felt I was being gagged and beaten.

Farmers didn't even allow us to come near the boundaries of their fields. When our women approached the boundaries to graze the cattle the farmers drove them away shouting, 'Don't graze your cattle here. We need grass for our own. Your whole community is monstrous. Don't you ever come to our fields. Your cattle will spoil our crops.' Dalit women were badly insulted. They were beaten as if they were slaves. Some farmers even harassed them sexually, pulled them into the crop, and raped them.

Santamai frequently told us such stories of injustice even as Jijabai had told stories of valour to young Shivaji. I thought Santamai's tears were like an epic. Her agony contained the potential spark of a great war. What a miserable past we had lived! My agony was not limited to myself alone. Injustice done to me was not just today's phenomenon but had a long history. The roots of this injustice went deep into history, for many thousands of years. My agony was also the agony of Lord Buddha. I see the same agony even today but why isn't the Buddha in me aroused?

Our forefathers used to be security guards at this Patil's mansion. Whenever the Patil had to go away to town on official work my forefathers would protect the mansion. Our forefathers were so naive that they didn't consider even once, the possibility of seeing the beautiful face of the Patil's sleeping wife. On the contrary they sacrificed their daughters, wives, sisters, and daughters-in-law to dark nights in the Patil's mansion. They were sacrificed like animals are at the time of laying the foundation stone of a building. Our forefathers were proud to be fed on the leftover food given to them by the Patil. This, my history, made me restless like the young Shivaji.

Just behind our house, Damuanna carried on his liquor business. When his stuff ran out his customers came to us. We too had our regular customers, but whenever our stuff was not good enough they went to Damuanna. It's always better to treat the customers well. If they are not treated properly they go away. The more you care for your customers the better. Masamai had a sweet tongue. Damuanna's mother-in-law,

Ratnamai, visited us whenever she happened to come to Hanoor. Ratnamai had no sons. Only four daughters. Two of her daughters were married in Hanoor. The eldest one, Rangoo, in Bombay, was a prostitute who had a son. Ratnamai told us he was tall and fair, and that his name was Jumma. Rangoo had bought a four-acre farm in our village with her own money, but it was Damuanna who looked after most of her affairs.

Rangoo's son Jumma used to go school. Rangoo lived frugally and saved for her son. But one day something went wrong. A letter written in red ink arrived and everyone in Damuanna's house started crying. The letter announced Rangoo's accidental death by fire. The stove on which she was cooking had exploded. Nobody really knew what the facts were. Who would go to Bombay to seek the truth? How would we ever know if Rangoo had died accidentally or was killed? Is Bombay so close that one could go there easily? Rangoo's golden life had ended. What was the use now of doing anything for her? Damuanna went to Bombay and returned with Rangoo's son Jumma.

Jumma was admitted to the fourth class of our village school. He was about ten or eleven years old. When his mother died he had become homeless. Damuanna decided to get him married. Damuanna and Ratnamai told Masamai that this Jumma was a handsome boy and that his mother had left him a fortune. When he grew up he would be independent. That was how Masamai must have thought about him. They planned to marry him to Vani, my sister. Even Kaka and my mother agreed unhesitatingly. Vani was physically stronger than Jumma, but my mother didn't want to acknowledge it. She just wanted to get her daughter married.

At last Jumma and Vani got married. Vani appeared to grow by the day whereas Jumma was still a boy in his shorts. Jumma stopped going to school. He was fed-up with village life. One day he just disappeared, perhaps to Bombay. Nobody had time to search for him as everybody was busy with his own affairs.

This is Narayan Patil's well. Last year the Mahars dug and built it. The spades and shovels of Mahars were used to dig the well. The Mahars gave their sweat for it. They also used explosives. They, the Mahars,

are the reason why there is water in the well. But now the same Mahars are not allowed to draw water from it, not even drinking water.

Mallya, Parshya, and I were standing by the well and its water reflected us. We were walking about, picking and eating jujube fruit. We were tired and thirsty. I stood at the edge of the well while Mallya and Parshya went down to drink water. Then I too went down to drink water while Mallya and Parshya kept watch to see if anybody was approaching. No one must see us drinking water from that well, otherwise there would be a scene. Even our thirst had to be quenched furtively.

Even the water here was under the control of the high castes. As I touched the water, gathering it in my cupped palms, ripples formed on the surface. The water inside the earth was shaken. We were lucky that no one saw us drinking water otherwise we would have been badly beaten. What is so peculiar about our touch that it pollutes water, food, houses, clothes, graveyards, tea shops, God, religion, and even man?

I still remember something that took place one Saturday. It was the weekend and so we were going home. On the way I quarrelled with the other boys. All the boys went ahead except me. I was left alone.

Shivappa was working on his farm. His wife arrived with his food, carrying it on her head, and a child on her hip. She asked me to help her put the bundle down. I always like to help others so I helped her put the bundle down. The moment Shivappa saw his wife, he stopped working and came towards her, but when he saw me he began to shout at me. Shivappa's wife tried to explain that I had only helped her. Shivappa grew angrier and said, 'He is Mahar. He is Santamai's grandson.' Shivappa's wife went pale and was on the verge of tears while Shivappa was mad with rage. He took off one of his shoes and threw it at me. I ran away towards the village.

I got through the final school examination with a first class and stood second in my class. Mallya, Shirole, and I had passed with merit and were greatly admired. Santamai, Dada, and I got drunk that night.

As we were poor my going to college was a problem. Santamai tried to borrow money from many people. She was even ready to pay interest

on what she borrowed and yet we couldn't raise the money. Finally, Santamai got fed-up of going around asking for money.

Dada's maternal uncle was a police constable at Barshi. He went to Barshi to bring the money but returned empty-handed. However, the uncle had promised to lend the money when his salary was paid. We were afraid that by then the admissions would be closed. I was eager to enter a college.

Santamai and I went to a moneylender. He was drunk. Santamai and I stood at some distance from him. Santamai's blouse was torn exposing her breast. The moneylender kept staring at the peeping breast, but he refused to lend us the money. His look spread like poison in my heart. I wished that the blouse of this moneylender's mother or sister was torn so that I could stare at *their* breasts. I burned within. Our poverty was detestable. I wanted to rebel against such humiliation.

Somehow I came to Sholapur for my college education and got admission in Dayanand College. After the school in my village, I felt free in this 'new environment'. This new atmosphere was encouraging and it made me enthusiastic.

There was an office clerk in Dayanand College called Nimbale. He was there at the counter at the time of my admission. He entered my name, then asked for my caste and religion. I replied that I was a Hindu Mahar. He asked in surprise, 'Is there Nimbale among the Mahar as well?' I replied, 'Yes,' and walked away.

I was afraid of my caste because I couldn't claim my father's caste and religion. In a sense I was not a Mahar, because high-caste blood ran in my body. Could I drain this blood out of my body? My own body nauseated me. The agony I lived through is my own as much as that of my village. The life of my village was mine. I was wounded by this landlord's mansion.

How is a person born with his caste? How does he become untouchable as soon as he is born? How can he be a criminal by birth? From his feet Lord Brahma gave birth to a vast low-caste community. Since then this community has been living as untouchables. To appease their hunger they steal, beg, fetch dead animals, and eat them. What is wrong if one

who has been deprived of bread for thousands of years, steals bread just once? If one had enough why would one steal? Why would one suffer at the hands of the police?

While studying in college I was mentally aflame. I was growing amidst a conflagration. The roots of the Movement were settling more firmly. Injustice towards us was assuming a new meaning. We were awakening under a new consciousness which was becoming more pervasive day by day.

Mallya, Dupargude, Dolare, and I were room-mates. We had all entered the college together with seventy generations of utter poverty behind us. Mallya had a maternal uncle, Nivruti, who worked in the post office and he gave Mallya his old clothes. Mallya gave me a pair of trousers and a shirt from that lot. We had these clothes altered by a street tailor. After alteration, the clothes had two creases, one the original, the other which appeared after the clothes were altered. Both the creases were visible and made us look rather odd. But we had to use those clothes as they covered our nakedness at least.

Our poverty didn't allow us to enjoy the luxuries of college life. The pain of poverty is so deep that it is limitless. It makes a man a man. Only if the umbilical cord that connects one with pain is colossal does one become strong. We continued our education amidst great poverty.

We barely had money for a cup of tea. Our plight made us introspective. There were so many Dalit students like us. This pain of poverty was not just mine. We all existed like grains crushed in a stone grinder.

Shevanta, a girl from our village, was married to someone from Sholapur. They lived in a dreary slum and among utterly poor people. Shevanta worked as a maid in the bungalows around her slum. She looked dull in spite of her youth, whereas women from the bungalows looked healthy in spite of their age. Who has stolen the sparkle from Shevanta's face? Who has stolen the bloom of this sunflower?

Whenever Shevanta and I met on the road, she gave me ten paise. She would say, 'We have met on the road. How can I offer you tea here? Take this ten paise and drink tea as though I offered it to you.' I could read history on Shevanta's face. When she walked away I too returned to my hostel.

At the hostel all the boys stayed together though we were from different places. We had different habits, and we did peculiar things. Mallya and I used to go around naked visiting everybody's rooms to ask if they had any problems. Our going around naked was a big joke in the hostel. We all laughed at it. Our uninhibited laughter was as free as a woman's hair after a bath.

Mallya and I used to ride to our village on a double-seat bicycle. It was a hired bike so we shared the charges equally. Dada was drunk, lying in the bus stand. People made fun of him. Santamai sat outside the bus stand chewing tobacco. I placed the bike on its stand. The moment Dada knew I had come he pretended he was all right. I felt sad and regretted having come home. In my absence Dada and Santamai were free to live as they liked. I was happy with my life in the college and the hostel. I thought of going back instantly. Santamai hugged and kissed me and Dada returned with tea for us. His eyes were red from drinking. He had hurt his knee. Mallya and I shared the cup of tea.

Dada stood in the middle of the road like a bus. Patting his biceps he was shouting, 'My tiger has arrived!' He meant me. He picked up a few stones from the road. I didn't know what was happening. Suddenly Santamai got up and took the stones from Dada's grip, shouting at him, 'What nonsense are you at when the boy has come home?' Dada cooled down then. He took the cup and saucer away. Santamai was critical of him. 'That's how Mahmood behaves these days after drinking. He spends all his money on drink while I starve.' I could never have managed Dada as Santamai did.

Afterwards I visited Masamai. She offered me a cup of liquor as if it were a cup of tea. Kaka and his friends were smoking ganja. They inquired how I was doing at the college.

Dada used to sneak in to drink. Santamai quarrelled with him because of that. Most of the time Kaka was there with his friends, smoking ganja. The pipe was passed among them. First it was Mule Bhimsha's turn to smoke; then he passed the pipe to Dadunya, and Dadunya passed it on to Kashinath. When that pipe was handed over to Kaka, he removed the piece of rag wrapped around it and cooled it with water. He then soaked the piece of rag, wrapped it again around the

pipe, and inhaled deeply from it. He even invited me to have a go. First my mother said, 'No,' but later she let me. I had a fit of coughing. Kashinath forced me to inhale. Each time, before inhaling, Dadunya would utter, 'Om'.

Their eyes were heavy with intoxication. The pipe-bowl was red, ablaze as it was with inhaling and exhaling. The smoke streaming from everybody's mouth, and Masamai abusing them, made the whole atmosphere inside the house queer.

As I was visiting them after a long time, Santamai had made egg curry specially for me. Dada, Santamai, and I were having dinner when the last bus arrived. Dada got up and left to see if there was any work for him. Santamai and I continued with our dinner. After dinner Santamai relaxed with her paan and tobacco. We continued chatting. She said, 'Nagi has gone astray, she is going around with the son of the senior Patil these days.'

Dada, Santamai and I slept in the open space behind the bus stand that night. I was worried about Nagi's future. Her husband was missing, she had come of age, and she was going out with someone else.

In the early hours of morning my sleep was disturbed by our bitch Champi who was sleeping at my feet. She suddenly ran, barking at someone. I got up, looked around and saw the figure of a girl disappearing into the dark. It was Nagi. The bitch returned after sniffing the shadowy figure to ascertain who it was.

I sat up. After some time I saw Nandu, the Patil's son sneaking away. Even now, I am surprised at my restraint.

Mallya and I went around the village. My sister Nagi was chatting with Nandu. I sternly asked Nagi to get back home and began to beat her. I was wild with anger. In reality I was fighting the whole village. I was trying to be a man with self-esteem but Nagi was letting me down.

The entire neighbourhood gathered round. Masamai didn't see anything wrong with what Nagi was doing. Aunt Mahadevi asked Masamai, 'Why is Sharanu beating her?' Masamai said angrily, 'Because she won't let him sleep with her.'

Masamai and I started to quarrel. Kaka tried to intervene. I rushed towards my mother, wanting to trample her. She started crying. Kaka too got angry. He told me off: 'It is none of your business. Let my daughter

behave as she likes. You have nothing to do with us.' I hated Kaka because I was helpless. I left at once for Sholapur.

A boy named Shivaji More used to bring our tiffin boxes. I felt brotherly affection for him because he brought news from home and from my village. Every day he would bring news like who had quarrelled in the village, who had died, which woman had given birth to a child, what wages were paid regularly to labourers, and messages from home.

One day Shivaji brought the news that Harya's wife had run away. This saddened me. Harya's wife was from Bombay. Harya had left our village and had gone to Bombay to make a living. When he returned he was married. Harya had, in fact, cheated his wife. She was Maratha by caste. Harya was a Mahar. He married her pretending that he was Maratha too, and owned lands and a mansion in the village. When Harya and his wife were returning home, they saw a sugar cane farm on the way. It actually belonged to Girmallya, but Harya told his wife that it was his. He also claimed that the Marwari's mansion was his. At last he brought her to his home, a mere hut. When the wife realized that she had been cheated she started crying and abusing Harya. Other women cowed her into silence.

For the sake of their son and daughter-in-law, Harya's parents used to sleep every night in our community hall. Early one morning Harya's wife went out to relieve herself. Harya was a late riser. When his mother arrived and woke him up, he found his wife was missing. They looked for her everywhere but found only the brass vessel she had carried water in while going out to shit.

All the boys in our hostel were Dalit. It was more or less like a camp. We were awed by our great struggle. I stopped saying 'namaskar' and started saying 'Jai Bhim' instead. I substituted Babasaheb for Ambedkar since it sounded less formal and more respectful. My youth had assumed a new meaning and significance. The blood flowed like hot lava through my body. My mind burned with myriad thoughts in silent protest. Babasaheb filled me with reverence. I felt I was meeting my mother of

the last seven births. I burned within myself whenever I heard news about the atrocities against Dalits. It made me very impatient.

There was a girl by name Suman whom I considered my sister. She worked at a grocer's. Her husband, a porter, pulled a loaded handcart. They had two children. Suman was quite light-skinned. She had affairs with many men as her husband was rather naive and trusting. Often she ran away with a different lover. Many times I had to intervene and bring her back home. Once she eloped with a cook. The next time I saw her she was with a different man. Sometimes she would disappear for five or six months together and then return to her husband. On another occasion she ran away with a truck driver. Her husband would carry his children on the cart. Whenever I met him he used to stop and wish me, 'Namaskar!' His children shouted 'Mama! Mama!' as soon as they saw me.

I had no money to give them. What was their future? Can we know the fate that Satwai is supposed to write on our foreheads on the fifth day of our lives? Suppose we remove the skin and muscle from our foreheads can we find it written there? Or is it all a myth?

Mallya and I frequently visited Sonu, Mallya's grandmother who was a sweeper. Sometimes she also went around begging. She always carried a basket full of stale food. Sometimes the food was fungus ridden and it stank. Whenever we visited her, she put the basket before us and asked us to eat whatever we liked and as much as we wanted. We were, of course, hungry. Mallya and I picked up the pieces of bhakari, wiped off the fungus and ate them.

Janabai, another sweeper, stayed next door to Sonuaji. Whenever we visited Sonu's house we chatted mainly about marriage and work. We used to say that we would never demand dowry and would prefer inter-caste marriages. Janabai's sister had a marriageable daughter. Janabai liked me, so she thought of arranging my marriage with her niece.

That afternoon I was supposed to visit Janabai's niece. I put on clothes borrowed from Dupargude, my room-mate. Mallya and I went to see the girl. I was happy as I was on the way to see my prospective wife, Janabai's niece, who was supposed to come to Janabai's house. When

Mallya and I reached Sonuaji's house Janabai was retying the broom. Sonuaji was not at home. Sonu's son, Mallya's uncle, was there. He was thoroughly drunk. We entered the house and sat with him. Mallya started talking with his uncle, who stank of liquor. Meanwhile, Janabai arrived. Mallya asked if she had brought along the girl, my prospective wife. Suddenly she went wild and shouted, 'We haven't yet lost our self-respect. Our family is of pure blood so we also expect the same of a bridegroom. Just anyone won't do for us. What does it matter however good the man is?' Somehow she had come to know that I was a bastard. Janabai's words pierced my heart. I felt I was being flogged in a market square.

Mallya's uncle Maryappa, on getting to know the whole matter, was furious with Janabai. He said, 'There is no high or low born in our Buddhist religion. I will give my daughter to him.'

These words from Maryappa were more precious to me than the sermons Buddha preached after attaining enlightenment.

One day Shivaji More called me aside while I was sitting amongst friends. He did that whenever there was some special message. Shivaji not only brought our tiffin from home but also news. We waited for him as one waits for God. We became excited as soon as his bicycle bell rang. On that day Shivaji took me aside and whispered, 'Nagi has married Nandu, the senior Patil's son. They both went secretly to Tuljapur and got married.' I was worried. It was nice that Nagi was married but would the marriage last? What would happen to Nagi? Would they live happily together? What was the reaction of the villagers to this marriage?

The next week Santamai came to see me. Initially she didn't mention Nagi's marriage but actually she had come all the way to warn me not to come to Hanoor.

Santamai was an old woman, she chewed tobacco all the time. Her sari and blouse were mostly in tatters. How could I take her, like this, to my room? Santamai was quite good looking. If she had better clothes I would have taken her to my room. I was ashamed of her. Whenever I saw my college mates approaching I increased the distance between me and Santamai by a few paces as if trying to prove that I had nothing

to do with this poor woman. All the while Santamai kept asking about my welfare. I didn't say much. If Santamai were a plate I would have hidden her under my shirt.

I took Santamai to Aunt Kalawati's house. Kalawati was Uncle Nivruti's wife. Whenever we visited her she welcomed us with a warm smile. She was never fed-up with us. Kalawati had given birth to seven daughters. She and her husband were both unhappy because they didn't have a son. Santamai used to stay with them for a day and then return to our village.

The next day when I went again to my aunt she was squatting at the entrance with her daughters. This aunt never considered me a stranger, nor did she ever tire of me. Suman, one of her daughters, was playing close by. She asked the aunt, 'Mother, is Santamai a Muslim?'

Her question was valid because Santamai never marked her forehead with kumkum, and yet my aunt was annoyed with her daughter for asking such a rude question. To call Santamai a Muslim was to expose her affair with a Muslim, that is to say Dada. My aunt gave Suman a good beating though the child was not in the wrong.

Whenever I heard that reservation facilities for Dalits were about to be cancelled it used to scare me. If these facilities are cancelled, give us our own Dalitsthan. We are educated only because these facilities exist; they were like a father to us. If there were no facilities we would have had no such education, would have been at home grazing cattle and helping our parents. Instead we were living in cities away from home, in order to get an education. Our parents were toiling to death there. I often thought of their hard labour, hunger, and hopes for our future. On every page of whatever book I read, I saw pictures of Santamai begging and Dada's hard work as a porter. Whenever we heard news that our mothers and sisters in the village were tortured we couldn't concentrate on our studies because we were so angry and frustrated.

We often felt that we should give up our college education, work hard and help our parents. In the year 1978 only two of us were graduates from our locality, the other boys of our age from our community were toiling as labourers on farms. Those who say that facilities must be

cancelled should first face casteism themselves. They must share the life of the untouchables. Let them live outside the village, ostracized like us. They should experience what it means to study while your father is lying drunk beside you. They wouldn't then protest against injustice. Why shouldn't we be suspicious of you? Other higher-caste boys of my age addressed us derogatively, but I had to address them respectfully. My tongue itself is circumscribed by Manu's innumerable laws. The hand that dares to beat one's wife is paralysed on such occasions.

During my college days, whenever I visited my village during vacations, I was bored. I could not tolerate the filth in my house. I had lost interest in the dreary village. It depressed me. Occasionally I helped my people by fetching liquor for them to sell. After their marriage, Nagi and Nandu were busy with domestic life. On his secret marriage with Nagi, Nandu was driven out of the house by his father and had been staying with us since then. He used to go to his house only to eat. He sneaked away three or four bhakaris for Nagi. Soon Nagi was pregnant. Nirmi too would reach puberty in the next six months or so. The thought of her marriage was already nagging us. Santamai was talking about my marriage too.

Whenever I started for Sholapur, Santamai would weep. She made special chapatis for me leavened with oil. Dada gave me some of his hard-earned money for sundry expenses. Nirmi and Vani rushed ahead to the bus to get a seat for me. I would sit by a window. Santamai and Masamai stood outside the window. The bus was always crammed with passengers. Dada went on with his work as a porter, carrying headloads of bundles to the top of the bus. The conductor issued tickets. Santamai tried to draw my attention to our poverty. Masamai had to go because there were customers for liquor. Dada changed the destination plates on the bus. Then he poured water in the radiator. Later he collected his wages from the passengers. He came to me to spend a few minutes. The conductor asked Dada to get down from the bus, as it was time to leave. Dada said farewell, and added, 'Don't you worry about us. Keep studying hard. I will never let you fall short of money.' The passengers were watching me and Dada, and I felt awkward as they probably regarded me as the grandson of a porter. I waited impatiently for the conductor to ring the bell so that the bus would take me away. Santamai in tattered clothes, Nirmi, Vani, all lingered till the bus bore me away. My

tears, which I had restrained so far, exploded. At last the conductor rang the bell and the bus moved. The hands waved in farewell by Dada, Santamai, Nirmi, and Vani followed me for a long time.

The Dalit Panthers had taken a march to the Legislative Assembly demanding the renaming of the Marathwada University. They wanted to change it to Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar University. Thousands of Panthers had arrived from all over Maharashtra to join the march. About a thousand Panthers from Sholapur had come to Bombay for the purpose.

This vast movement looked like the sun. We were becoming aware of a great struggle ahead and felt the need for an organization to meet the challenge. The police charged the march of activists with lathis. We scattered all over Bombay. Many activists were even arrested. The police blocked us from all sides and we suffered a lot.

Next day I went to the market at Rani Laxmi. Suryakant and Dharma were supposed to be there. It was my first ever visit to Bombay. I looked for Suryakant and Dharma. How was I going to recognize them?

After the death of their father, Suryakant and Dharma had come to Bombay to make a living. By now they were married and living in Byculla. They pulled loaded handcarts in the Rani Laxmi market. Sometimes they worked as porters to earn extra money. The last time I had seen them was when I was very small. I still had a vague impression of their faces. I stared at the face of every man who pulled a cart. I saw my brothers' faces in every porter. I looked, but I could not identify them. I tried to inquire after them but nobody could tell me their whereabouts. I couldn't meet Suryakant and Dharma, but if I had met them would they have recognized me? Would they have treated me like a brother?

I am twenty-five years old now and cannot recognize my own brothers—nor my father. They are all alive. We may not recognize each other even if we happened to travel in the same bus. That's what this journey of life is like. Our eyes are blindfolded and we wander not knowing where, like Dhritarashtra and Gandhari or Karna and Kunti or Eklavya and Ashwathama. On the battlefield of life we fight our own fathers, uncles, sisters, brothers, mothers. We battle with ourselves as if we are our own enemies. All this is because we are controlled by caste.

We are the vanquished. We are fighting another battle against convention. Though we may be defeated in this, there will be yet another battle in which we never surrender.

One day Shivaji More, that tiffin-carrying messenger boy from our village brought another piece of news. Santamai was going to ask for Mallya's sister to be my bride. Mallya and I had been classmates right from the first standard in the village school up to BA. We had eaten from the same plate and had drunk water from the same vessel. We had also shared the same bed. We were very intimate. Mallya's mother had always been fond of me. I was very happy at the idea of marrying the sister of such a dear friend. But the news that Shivaji brought the next day pierced my heart. Mallya's parents had refused the proposal because I was not of pure blood. These people love conventions more than they do human beings.

I was ashamed of this culture. I was terribly angry at its customs, but I was helpless. I had suffered the pain of insults. The thought of marriage was intolerable to me. The thought of selecting a girl as a match shocked me like acid thrown on me. I didn't want such shocks. It was better to stay unmarried.

Mallya's family was devout, particularly his grandmother, Tukava. The custom of dedicating one's children to God is practised only among the backward community. Ambabai, Yallama, Laxmi, Khandoba are the gods and goddesses worshipped by the Mahars. Masoba, Maryai, Khoklai, Satwai are few more names that can be added to the list. If someone did not have a child they made various sacred vows. If a daughter is born after offering a vow to Goddess Ambabai that girl is named Ambabai after the Goddess, if it is a son he is named Ambadas. If they make their vow to Goddess Laxmi and a daughter is born, that girl is named Laxmi, and if a son, his name will be Laxman. They also dedicate their children as Potraj in the name of the Goddess Laxmi. There is also a custom of dedicating children to God Khandoba. A boy born as such is called Waghya and a girl is called Murali. For Yallama a boy is called Jogtya and a girl Jogtin. I have never come across a Potraj among the

Brahmins or a Waghya among the Lingayats, the high castes. Why are such customs laid down for Mahars only?

A girl dedicated to God is never married because she is supposed to have already married God. Such a girl called a devadasi can live with a man she loves after performing certain rituals. The children born to devadasis are considered impure by blood and are not entitled to trade or work in a village. They live by begging.

A devout woman is dedicated to Ambabai. She is taken to Tuljapur and after the rituals she is dedicated to the goddess there. Then a guru or a priest is chosen and appointed for her. That guru gives her a basket and a book of scripture. He makes her take an oath to always speak the truth and never to cheat anyone. After that the woman starts to live as a devotee. Santamai had gone through such rituals and has been a devotee. Mallya's uncle Gyanbamama too is a devotee. Such rituals have continued for generations.

As people from our Maharwada go to Tuljapur they also go to Chivari known for its Goddess Laxmi. Once when I spoke disbelievingly about the Goddess Ambabai, Santamai grew wild with anger. She cursed me, 'If you speak ill about Ambabai, she will make you miserable. You will die of the insects and worms in your body.' Our Maharwada has three such families of devotees. There are five or six Potrajs as well. Sambhubaap's first son Appasha was a Potraj, but he died quite young. How can a person dedicated to God die? After Appasha, Sangu was offered as Potraj. But Sangu cut his hair though a Potraj is supposed to wear his hair long. He was humiliated because of this. In a sense he had not cut his hair, but God's. Sangu was an epileptic, and whenever he had a fit, people said he was being punished by the Goddess Laxmi.

Every year we went on a pilgrimage to Chivari. As soon as we entered the hills of Chivari, Santamai would be possessed by some spirit. She had tremors till she entered the temple and saw the goddess. She would run ahead, followed by Dada, Nirmi, and me. We would get tired of running after her. The Laxmi temple at Chivari is hidden among the hills. This hilly region is busy at the time of the pilgrimage. Everywhere there are bullock carts. The place also gets crowded. Thousands of Potrajs wander all over the place beating their drums. Their painted faces and

their cries inviting the goddess to possess them were terrible. The whole scene could make you tremble. Uncountable roosters, goats, and buffaloes are sacrificed to the goddess. The temple yard is splashed with blood. Also in the yard, many Potrajs played on their drums and ten or twelve possessed women danced to the drumbeats the entire day. They shouted in their shrill voices, their cries sounding horrendous. They danced, twirling. Their gestures were obscene. The moment the drummer stopped these women urged him to start again.

While dancing to the music these women occasionally prostrated themselves on the ground. A new potraj was initiated ritually. Small children were thrown ritually from the top of the temple and caught in a piece of cloth spread out below, to thank the goddess for fulfilling some wish.

Some people performed the ritual of tonsuring their children's heads. Some children underwent the naming ceremony. Many vows ended with rituals and many new vows were taken. Everywhere clay ovens would burn as people camping in the area cooked their food. Skinned and headless goats would be hung on the bullock carts of owners who had sacrificed those animals.

On the first day of the pilgrimage, the Patil of Chivari beheaded a male buffalo with a sword. This was an honour and the Patil's privilege. Then during the day, a hundred or so goats were sacrificed by those who had taken vows. It was horrendous to see beheaded buffaloes lying in a row. A live goat was skinned and made to walk in front of the deity. Sometimes women who were possessed for the first time came shrieking and running towards the temple, followed by relatives running after her. The woman returned to normal the moment her forehead was smeared with ash from the deity. If she didn't become normal it meant she was not possessed by the spirit of the goddess but by the spirit of a ghost. Dattumama's wife also used to get possessed. Whenever she was possessed Dattumama tied her legs and beat her. They grappled with each other on such occasions.

The keep of the Patil of Kader was very beautiful. She was always guarded by five or six strong men who followed her everywhere. Whenever she was possessed she danced in a frenzy. Even an expert drummer would weary as she danced. Everyman tried to put his hand

around her waist while she danced. Sometimes while dancing, the folds of her sari would loosen. Her bodyguards tried to rearrange the folds and tuck them back in. While doing this their hands would reach her secret parts. The woman realized the trick and abused them while continuing to dance in a frenzy. Dattumama used to tell this story while we were sitting under our bullock cart waiting for the mutton to be cooked. It made us laugh.

The next day everybody went away as the pilgrimage ended. Nobody stayed behind as the next day brought in another pilgrimage in the name of a ghost deity. It was believed that ghosts too arrived on the scene that night. A ghost deity was carried in a palanquin. These ghosts licked the blood which had splattered during the earlier sacrifice. They too danced. If they came across a human being they broke his neck. I didn't believe all this nonsense. Then Santamai told me about an event that had taken place long ago.

'Once three sceptical people had stayed behind after the pilgrimage was over to see the parade of ghosts. One of them hid in a tree, the other in the temple, and the third hid behind the temple.'

'By midnight the palanquins began to arrive one by one. Each palanquin was in the name of a different ghost diety. Throughout the hills, lamps could be seen. The man who was hiding on the tree got scared, so he fell down and died. This created a commotion among the ghosts. They had smelled a human creature. The ghosts wanted to sacrifice a human being. The goddess spoke, "Eat only that which is in front of you and not what is at the back." The man who was hiding inside the temple died of terror, because he thought the goddess meant him. Only the one who was hiding behind the temple survived.' Santamai told this story as if she had personally witnessed it. I teased her, 'Give me a pistol and I will stay here.'

There are three temples of Bhutalsidh in our village. Two are located in the locality of the Dhangars and one in our Maharwada. On festival days a drum is played. The priest who worships the ghost diety gets possessed. The entire village comes together. The priest then prophecies the rise and fall in market prices, the condition of crops, rainfall, the virtues and sins of the people, the arrival of doomsday, etc. The next day nobody cares for him. People don't give him even tobacco if he

asks for it. Tobacco becomes more valuable than this godly man. For the rest of the year he loses himself in liquor and hemp.

On the day following the dark, moonless night or on the day following the full moon night they perform the ritual of driving the ghost away from a possessed person. People from surrounding villages come on those two days every month to get rid of the ghosts. A drum is played for a long time while the possessed shout and shriek. The special priest flogs them. The day is grim and dreadful.

Inside our community hall small children play a game imitating the priest who flogs the possessed. A boy pretends to be a god. He dances in imitation of the priest. Two children hold the priest round the waist. Some of them imitate the drummer. A boy called Ekta Chambhar imitates Nagappa. I keep watching these children at play. How can you compare these village children with children in cities who play cricket? Why is this generation getting spoiled? Why is there such a contrast between a city and a village? When will life in villages improve? When will the superstitions of these people end? Why doesn't the dam at Katgaon break and float this village away?

Rambaap was Parshya's grandfather. Though illiterate he was the unchallenged jury of our Maharwada. He still drinks tea in the separate cup and saucer at Shivram's hotel. If some villager gives him a half-smoked bidi, he still salutes him with reverence. He never understood the decentralization of power or the Panchayat Rajya. How can an illiterate person be on the jury? How many ballot papers are bought with just a cup of tea? For what kind of power? For what kind of transformation?

A festival in the name of the god Vithoba used to be celebrated in our village on a grand scale. It lasted for a week. Pilgrims from different places flocked to our village during that week. They came from long distances too. The whole village was immersed in day-long music and devotional songs. One day Shivaji More gave me a message from home asking me to go for the festival. Five or six friends in my room at that time were also ready to join me, so we all set off on bicycles.

'My house' was our village bus stand. I asked my friends to be seated on the benches inside the bus stand and treated them to tea.

They said, 'Let us go to your house now.' But I had no house. My father lived in a mansion, my mother in a hut in the Maharwada, and I on the streets. Behind the bus stand my grandmother cooked food in the open. We all ate food from a single plate. Granny told us the story of the seven brothers who had shared a single grain of sesame.

At night we listened to devotional songs but my friends didn't find them interesting. They were tired and sleepy, so we came back to the bus stand. Santamai and Dada were already asleep. I had to wake them up as we needed the rugs on which they were sleeping. I took the rugs from them, and spread them on the floor for my friends to sleep on. Besides us there were many passengers inside the bus stand. They were the pilgrims who had come for the week-long festival. They were in a jolly mood. Though my friends and I lay down, we could not sleep as those people kept chatting. One of my friends, Dupargude, shouted at them, to silence them. They stopped talking for a few minutes but started again. This time Dupargude abused them. There was a quarrel. One of the passengers was smart. He said, 'Don't you have a home to go to and sleep? You will be comfortable there. We will go on talking, no one can stop us. This place belongs to the government.' Santamai intervened and everybody kept quiet.

We slept on a rug and pulled another one over ourselves. Santamai and Dada had nothing to sleep on nor anything to cover themselves with, so they sat on the bench throughout the night.

The next day my friends left for Sholapur. I felt sorry for the inconvenience they had suffered and was becoming acutely conscious of our poverty.

That day Santamai did not light the clay stove, as there was a bhakari left over from last night's meal. How could three of us—Santamai, Dada and I—share only one bhakari? I was extremely hungry. Santamai brought the tin box of flour and said, 'Here look, our store of flour. You eat this bhakari. Don't worry about us.' I lifted the tin box. It was heavy so I thought it really contained flour.

After I ate, I drank water to fill my stomach and blunt my hunger. Santamai had gone out somewhere. I opened the tin box and found that she had put a big stone inside it to make it heavy.

Now that Nirmi had come of age, she could be settled in marriage. I was also yet to be married. But how were we to find a match for us? Masamai would show Nirmi and Vani to all her customers, requesting them to find bridegrooms for the girls. Some of them spoke nonsense and passed humiliating remarks as they were drunk. Santamai tried to win their favour by not charging them for their liquor. When the customers were drunk they assured me, 'Don't you worry. We will fix your marriage. We will also find a job for you. We know so many people we can influence. But first you must get through matriculation.' I had to tell them that I had already passed it and was studying for my MA course. They kept talking nonsense because they were drunk. 'Boys with BA and MA degrees are useless and unemployed. You just get through your matric and come to us. We will sort out everything for you.'

Masamai had a friend, a Mang by caste. She had a daughter, born of her liason with a Patil. That girl went around as a singer, with a drummer. My mother and Kaka said they would arrange a marriage for me with that girl. But somehow it didn't click. Every customer from another village who came to us for liquor, was asked if there happened to be a girl in their village born to a Patil and his concubine, a woman of our caste. The girl I married needed to be a hybrid like me to ensure a proper match. A bastard must always be matched with another bastard. No one else will marry their daughters to a bastard like me.

At such moments I remembered Maryappa, who under the influence of liquor, had promised to give his daugther in marriage to me. I used to keep imagining how his daughter would look. Maryappa Kamble was a peon in the zilla parishad. He had four sons—Arun, Hari, Rahul, and Sunil—and only one daughter, Kusum. I visited Sonu frequently with Mallya.

One day Maryappa Kamble came to Sholapur. He had no money to drink, so I paid for him. He also had no money to go back to Barshi so I had to pay for that as well. Before he left, Maryappa promised that he would return my money by money-order as soon as he reached Barshi. Of course he didn't keep his word. Once again he turned up the next week and asked for a hundred rupees more. 'My daughter is mature now. She is to be married, but I have no money.' I had just received my scholarship money, so I gave him as much as I could spare.

The next month when Maryappa Kamble visited I avoided him because I had no money to spend on him. But the next day he turned up again and cornered me. This time he said that he wanted his daughter to marry me. I accepted his proposal even though I did not know how his daughter, whom I had never seen, looked. Moreover, I wasn't getting any other proposals.

So I was to marry Kusum, and my sister Nirmi was to marry Maryappa Kamble's son, Hari. Maryappa's elder son was against my marrying his sister. He said I visited prostitutes and was a drunkard. Even Mallya's parents were against this marriage because we were of impure blood and there ought not to be any relationship with us. In spite of this opposition Kamble arranged our marriage.

My in-laws from Barshi printed a photograph of Dr Ambedkar on the invitation cards, but Kaka printed photographs of Shiva and Parvati. The wedding was to take place in our village. Kaka wanted to paint 'Om' on the walls of our house instead of 'Jai Bhim, Namo Buddha.'

Unaided, Nirmi and I had to smear the entire community hall with dung as nobody came forward to help us. Our hands were bruised. Single-handedly, I cut and fixed buntings on lines of string. I decorated the hall with the icons of Buddha, Phule, and Ambedkar. I wanted my wedding ceremony conducted according to Buddhist rituals, whereas Kaka insisted on traditional Hindu rituals. All the villagers gathered for the wedding which was getting delayed. The appointed auspicious moment had already passed. We were still busy tying the mangalsutra. Meanwhile Kaka's priest came forward and suddenly started uttering the mangalashtak. Akshatas were hurled at us. The crowd dispersed instantly and nearly everyone disappeared.

I grabbed the microphone and spoke with feeling. 'My wedding has not yet taken place. I don't accept what has happened just now because I don't believe in Hindu rituals. We are going to be wedded according to Buddhist rituals. So, those who have concern for us need not go away.' Nobody heeded my request. Only the guests from the bride's side stood there like immigrants. Kaka, Dada, Santamai, Masamai no one was there. Dada was busy with his porter's job at the bus stand and Masamai was serving liquor to her customers in my house. I garlanded Kusum. Hari garlanded Nirmi.

One of my aunts, Kalawati, presented me with a round steel vessel to drink water with. How proud I was of it. It was the first time I had received a steel vessel as a present. Santamai wrapped it up in rags and put it in her chest, like a secret treasure. She took it out only once, after many days, to serve water to a guest.

One day Suni used that vessel and I was furious. Why was she using my steel vessel, instead of an aluminium one? I snatched it from her, threw the water away, and put it back in the chest.

After the wedding my in-laws refused to send their daughter to our house. My mother-in-law said, 'There is no discipline in your house. You sell liquor there. All kinds of people visit you. Our daughter will be spoiled. You may take her when you start working. We won't send our daughter until you are independent.' When would I get a job? And suppose I didn't get one? If that's your opinion of our house, why did you arrange the marriage? I got annoyed. Masamai advised me, 'Don't treat her like a wife. Let her rot.' Santamai had something different to say, 'Now that you are married, sleep with her at least once and prove that you are a man.' I then went to Barshi where my in-laws lived. Every time I visited them I found my father-in-law drunk. He quarrelled with me, and my mother-in-law kept abusing me. She said, 'You are rotten people. We have purified you. You were lying on the garbage.' They drove me out of the house. My mother-in-law turned out to be a terrible woman. She always said bitter things. I was angry with my in-laws, and tried to insult them. The whole neighbourhood came to the scene to watch the show.

My in-laws kept refusing to send their daughter to live with me as my wife. Whenever I went to see her, they made me sleep outside. This angered me greatly. I used to wake up my mother-in-law at odd hours in the night and, to annoy her, ask her for money to go to a prostitute. This made her very angry. Irritated, I tried to sleep. I thought of dumping my mother-in-law in a tonga and getting rid of her.

My elder brother-in-law was a Dalit Panther activist. One day we were standing with a group of his friends in the street, talking. He introduced me to his friends who were also activists. At that moment it so happened that Dada's maternal uncle, Gulam Hussain Havaldar, was passing by. He saw me and stopped to speak to me. He invited me to

his house before leaving. One boy in the group who was a Dalit activist asked me, 'How do you know this man?' I said casually, 'He is our relative.' The activists were suspicious. How can Ghulam Hussain Havaldar, a Muslim, be related to Limbale? Everyone kept quiet.

That evening my father-in-law came home drunk and picked a quarrel with me. My mother-in-law was already annoyed with me. Whenever I quarrelled with my in-laws, Kusum my wife became tense. The problem of pure and impure blood meant nothing to her. Maryappa Kamble said, 'My son is the president of the Dalit Panthers. He is highly respected by his followers. You say that you are a relative of that Muslim. You are the cause of humiliation for us among our own caste. We have told everyone that you are of pure blood. You must have some self-respect, otherwise don't enter our house.' I felt terribly insulted.

So a Muslim can't be my relative because his religion is different from mine. We are like animals of different species. Such discrimination between one offspring and the other!

One day I just decided to take my wife away but Maryappa Kamble stopped us. He snatched the bags from Kusum and threw them on the road. He pushed my wife back into the house. Kusum started crying. She began to call me 'Sharan, Sharan,' uttering my name for the first time. I walked up to my father-in-law and grabbed him by his collar. He let Kusum go. We both reached the bus stand. Meanwhile my brothers-in-law arrived on bicycles. I had to tolerate all this nonsense because my sister had married into their family. It was a kind of exchange of daughters among the families—daughter for daughter-in-law.

Nirmi's married life was quite happy. Nagi was pregnant by now, and she and Nandu were living happily together. Vani too would reach puberty in a year or so but her husband was still missing. Their marriage was almost broken. One day I set off for his village in search of him.

Horti was a small village belonging to the old Nizam's province. To this day the village has no electricity, nor even a post office nor is it even visited by a bus. The postman handed over the letters of the villagers whenever they happened to go to Naldurg on market day. When I reached the village, Parbatajya was sleeping on a cot. He got up the moment he

saw me. Vani's husband was not there. Where had he disappeared? He was merely ten or twelve years old.

Parbatajya had managed to acquire a lame bullock by working in the village for someone on contract. It was slaughtered the day I reached there, so there was beef everywhere and blood splattered all around. Fleas kept pestering the whole house and the yard. They had slaughtered the bullock so as to give me a special treat as a mark of their hospitality. Parbatajya tried to persuade me to stay until the meat was finished. This rather shocked me. How much meat could I eat?

The beef was shared with the people in their Maharwada. Parbatajya sold the beef in portions and Ratnamai cooked her portion in a huge vessel. Coquettish, teenage girls were giggling at me as I ate pieces of the cooked meat.

After a few days I started back home. Parbatajya accompanied me for some distance before he said farewell. When we walked away from the village he pointed out a spot to me—a small valley at the bottom of a hill. He then told me his recollections of the bloody Razakar Movement.

'We forced our way into the houses of the Muslims in our village and caught them. Some of them managed to escape. Those who were caught were brought to this spot. We made them lie flat on the ground. You should have seen that big knife with which we slaughtered the ox yesterday. I cut the throats of eleven Muslims with that same knife. We forced them to lie flat and cut their throats. We burned them all afterwards on this same spot. The villagers used their women as prostitutes.'

Hindus and Muslims are both born in this country. Both are human beings. The blood of both people is red. Only their religions are different. Yet they are after each other just because they have different religions. In the name of religion there is bloody carnage, riots, and crusades. They don't show any humanity to a human being from another religion. If you cut out his religion a man is still a man.So why doesn't a human being from one religion love a human being from another? Why does religion hinder them? Why is man imprisoned by conventions?

I got a job as a telephone operator at Ahmedpur. I took the position because of my poverty and discontinued further education. Santamai

and Dada had by now become old and I was married. I was responsible for my people and had to be financially independent.

My job was in the post-and-telegraph department. Marathwada was a disturbed region because the renaming of the university had become an issue. I feared for my life because I had heard that somewhere they had set a telephone office on fire. Agitators had even attacked a police station. Two people had been shot dead when police fired on them. The mob had also stoned the house of an MLA. All around there was terror and tension. Dalit localities were set on fire even during daytime and there were a series of murders. They threatened to seal off the whole Marathwada region. There were long marches everywhere in the state of Maharashtra. Every day the newspapers were full of news about fires and arrests as the agitation in Marathwada spread to other parts of the state. In my blood, echoing like a foetus, was an agitation. The shoots of this ferment in my blood were bright like the sun. The intense hatred between Dalits and high castes was engendered in the minds of both groups. The government was indifferent, the leadership of Bapurao Jagtap and Jogendra Kawade was inspiring.

The Hindu community was hurt, because with the facilities given to them, Dalits were getting an education and becoming aware of their rights. A generation of militant youths generated by the movement also threatened the Hindus and the thought of untouchables living contented lives with jobs made available to them, irritated them. Dalits refused to do the lowly jobs that they once did for Hindus. Such changes in the Dalit community occured with their conversion to Buddhism. The thought that the community which had lived the life of cats and dogs for thousands of years was now behaving as equals was unacceptable to the high-caste Hindus. I thought it safer to be secretive about my caste in such a terrible situation.

Whenever they heard that my name was Limbale they thought I must be a Lingayat by caste. The Lingayats quickly recognized me as one of them. I started living in their locality. I began to take an interest in their group which sang devotional songs to Shiva. In the very first week I wrote letters to my friends instructing them not to write Jai Bhim in their letters since casteism was predominant in the Marathwada region, and riots were occurring because of the renaming issue. I deliberately

wrote letters to my friends whose names were Patil and Joshi, informing them of my new job. I hid the photographs and books of Dr Ambedkar in my trunk. Instead, I started reading novels by V.S. Khandekar, and detective stories.

If I happened to see a Dalit friend approaching I quickly altered my route. If he abruptly appeared in front of me I greeted him with a 'Namaskar' instead of 'Jai Bhim'. Even if someone said 'Jai Bhim' to me I responded with a namaskar. If I happened to be going with a high-caste friend and someone greeted me with a 'Jai Bhim' I felt like an outsider. I was worried that my caste would be revealed.

If they came to know my caste they would drive me out of the house I had rented from a high-caste landlord. I would be beaten badly. They would even torture my wife. My sister Vani was now living with me and I was afraid of losing my prestige. Sometimes I felt I should give up my job and run away. I even applied for a transfer but it didn't work out.

We lived keeping our caste a secret. I felt the house we were living in was like the Lakshagruha. When Vani reached puberty, women from the Lingayat community gathered and sang the songs meant for the occasion. We offered tea to all the women who came to this small function. I informed my people at home that Vani had come of age.

Dada and Santamai arrived to take Vani back home, as she had to be married now. How could I find a suitable boy for her? We were the impure ones. Moreover we kept our caste a secret and lived as Lingayats. I felt ashamed of Santamai's and Dada's utter poverty. I couldn't offer any meat to Santamai as we were living as Lingayats who were strictly vegetarian, but Santamai had brought a bundle with two kilos of beef from the village. When I was a child I used to eat the leg bone with great relish. She knew my liking for it and had brought two pieces of leg bone—a pleasant surprise.

Immediately, I shut the doors and windows of my house. I was annoyed at Santamai. Patting my back she said, 'My boy, eat this. I know you don't get this here. Who is going to see you eat it? We will also join you.' I was in a fix. If someone came to know about this I would be exposed. I didn't know what to do.

However, we ate the meat late at night. Only when I had taken the bones and thrown them away, was I relieved. In the morning I found

the dogs from our locality chewing the bones. Again I was scared and felt as if those dogs were tearing pieces off me and eating me up.

Another problem arose because of Santamai and Dada's stay with us. Santamai had given up using kumkum on her forehead since her husband's death. She had also stopped wearing a mangalsutra around her neck. She now looked like a widow, which in fact she was. But Dada was with her all the time like a husband. The neighbourhood women asked Kusum about the nature of their relationship. One woman even sent kumkum to Santamai. We were ashamed of our past. We hid ourselves as a leper hides patches of rash on his skin. They couldn't guess my caste on the basis of my surname, so when they became suspicious they kept asking for the surname of my in-laws. I told lies. I said their name was Bhosale or Pawar or some other high-caste name instead of the real one, Kamble.

Whenever Dada came to see me, I felt he was my father. We never felt differently though our religions were not the same. If anybody asked him about his caste he said it was Lingayat. He lied for my sake. Dada lying about his religion was like a mother who lies while buying a bus ticket for her child. She never tells his real age in order to save money on a half-ticket.

What kind of religious burden do we carry like a porter his load? Why is this burden of religion thrust upon us? Why can't we discard it? How has man lost himself under this huge tree of caste, religion, breeding, family?

In Ahmedpur our landlord Sittaram Gutte was a fine gentleman. We never had any trouble with anything while we were his tenants. Actually he was a short-tempered man. We called his wife Bhabi. She was a very affectionate woman. When I came to stay with them, they never showed any signs of caste consciousness. I started visiting Bhimnagar and got to know people like myself.

I used to receive many letters. One day I received a letter from home informing me of Chandamai's death. Kusum and I wept a lot that day.

We had decided to celebrate the birth anniversary of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar on a grand scale, and were very enthusiastic about it. I was invited to the meeting but I didn't go because someone had already visited me the day before with whom I had had an argument. The leader

said, 'Limbale saheb we are of pure blood. Those people living down there are impure. Perhaps you don't know that. Don't be on their side at the meeting tomorrow. The president for this celebration must be from our side and not from the other.' Obviously he did not know the facts about my birth. What would happen if the volunteers of this vast Dalit movement came to know that I was impure? Would they too avoid and ostracize me?

A procession in the name of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar was on the march. Dagdu Waghmare was shouting slogans at the top of his voice. Bansode-teacher, Dhaswadikar-teacher, and Kadam-mama were taking care to see that the procession went well. People in the procession were all pure Mahars, but what about me with my impure blood? I felt extremely sad about my low birth. So what about me? I am a whirlwind.

The procession of restless Dalit youths was moving. The riots and agitation due to the renaming of the university had not died down yet. 'Suppose someone throws stones at this procession?' I was nagged by this doubt. I had read the day before that a similar procession had been stoned somewhere. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's statues were being defaced because they were symbols of self-illumination.

One day my father-in-law died. Kusum, my wife, went to pay her respects before the cremation. A saint-cum-villian had disappeared into the soil, a victim of alcoholism.

I was transferred to Latur. It was difficult for me to settle down in Latur, leaving behind my circle of friends at Ahmedpur. However, I went to Latur. I faced the problem of finding a house in a new town and my caste followed me like an enemy. Latur was such a big place with huge buildings, houses and bungalows, but I was turned away wherever I went. They said frankly, 'We don't want to rent out our house to Muslims and Mahars.' Should I put this town to the torch? Such a big town—but I could not get a single room. Every town and person was caste conscious. This casteism has dehumanized everyone.

Tulsi plants were kept at the entrance of every house. In the living room of every house hung photographs of the gods Rama and Shankar. I thought such people queer. I felt I was an alien in such localities. To

me this way of life seemed hostile. I now felt guilty about asking to rent a house. I didn't feel that the people who revered icons and consecrated threads were my people. I used clean clothes, bathed every day and washed myself clean with soap, and brushed my teeth with toothpaste. There was nothing unclean about me. Then in what sense was I untouchable? A high caste who is dirty was still considered touchable! This city was made of herds of castes. Even localities were identified by castes.

I couldn't find a house for myself in Latur. I requested most of my friends to help me, but it was impossible to find a house in the town. At last I settled in a house in Bhimnagar. Here the houses did not have bathrooms and toilets. Women bathed openly and urinated everywhere in the open. I felt awkward while walking through this locality. In the morning and evening women used to shit openly by the roadside. I felt embarrassed to walk between rows of shitting women squatting on both sides of the road. Cycle-rickshaw drivers, porters and labourers were the main inhabitants of this locality. People lived in the smallest possible spaces. Each one worried only about his hunger. The stomach was the threshold of their capability.

The locality nauseated me. I didn't want to adopt the values of such a locality. I was a Dalit who had become a Brahmin by attitude, but high-caste people didn't even allow me to stand at their doorsteps. Either I should live in Bhimnagar, or in the Dalit locality or even in a Muslim locality. I was an outcaste in all other localities.

Bhimnagar in Latur was also a graveyard of the Marwari community. That's where they were cremated. People from my community lived here under tin roofs. I too lived in such a dwelling.

Most of the time, corpses were burnt just behind my house and clouds of smoke passed through my house. Sometimes three or four bodies were burnt at the same time. The whole place smelt of burning flesh. It was painful while I was eating to have to hear the weeping of the familes of the dead. The graveyard didn't allow me to sleep peacefully. I used to get restless. The skull of a burning corpse splitting and cracking made a terrifying sound. There was no peace of mind. Most of the time my daughter was ill. Whenever my daughter Asmita ran high fever I lay prostrate on the ground of the graveyard, praying. It was not an

auspicious place. I strongly felt that I must change my house. But where could I find another?

It is midnight now and I lie sleepless. I have a feeling that my head is going to be blasted right now. All of Bhimnagar is asleep. Someone's body is burning on a pyre, but I am burning within. I don't even remember my parents, my wife, or my daughter. On such lonely nights I neither masturbate nor think of going to a prostitute. I am out of myself, like Siddhartha who left his palace at midnight.

Every day I came across old people. How sickly they looked. Dead bodies, beating of drums, burning of a dead body, someone weeping for his dead: these were my daily experiences and I recalled Siddhartha deserting his home. In the evening I sat on the tin roof of my house. The corpse burns slowly. My father-in-law burned in the same way. Chandamai must have rotted and become one with the earth by now.

On such lonely and depressing nights I watched the people sleeping in Bhimnagar, the path winding between the huts, a garbage heap at some distance. I hoped for some apostle or an angel. Or at least a terrible ghost. But there was nothing here except the howling of dogs.

At midnight I became conscious that a woman was waiting for me to go away. Perhaps she wanted to urinate. I entered my house and shut the door. My house was like an ancient cave. When I lay down I kept tossing and turning restlessly. I wished for a dream at least in the early hours of dawn, like the one Mayadevi had at the time of Siddhartha's birth.

I received a letter from home. Pami's and Indira's marriages were fixed. They were to be married into the same family, to brothers from Akkalkot, so they would be sisters-in-law to each other. I was happy to hear about the marriages of my sisters. Indira was studying in the second standard whereas Pami was about eight or nine years of age. Another sister, Vani's marriage had failed; she had been married at a very early age.

I remember the story of Aailamai and Rambaap. Aailamai's mother and Rambaap's mother were pregnant at about the same time. They took a vow that their children would marry one another. If one of them had a daughter and the other a son they would marry. If both had sons or both had daughters the vow was automatically cancelled. It was a

common but queer custom. Aailamai and Rambaap themselves were married like this.

Malan was Pami's and Indira's mother-in-law. She was a Muslim. Swami, a driver, was in love with her, and helped her to get a divorce. He was Lingayat. Malan had two sons by Swami. One of the sons, Gurusidh, was Pami's husband. He was just fourteen or fifteen years old. The other son was Basavanna, hardly ten or twelve years old, and he was Indira's husband. Malan had a daughter as well from her previous Muslim husband. This girl, Chandbi, did odd jobs to make her living. She had to look after her household as well as her drunken husband.

When the marriages of Pami and Indira were being negotiated, we heard that the mother of the bridegroom was Muslim and the father Lingayat. Swami the driver and Kaka were both Lingayat. Masamai was a Mahar and Malan a Muslim. The word spread that Masamai too was of Muslim stock. Dada, a Muslim was useful in the negotiations.

The weddings over, Pami and Indira went to Akkalkot to undergo certain rituals. Vani went with them. There was a bar in front of Pami's and Indira's house. Vani got involved with a man who worked there. Just two days after the marriage Vani, Pami, and Indira returned home never to go back to their husbands because by then the in-laws had come to know that Masamai was a Mahar. Marriages were broken up like a game of dolls. Indira is now studying in the third standard and Pami goes around gathering twigs for fuel. As both were deserted by their husbands they ceased marking their foreheads with kumkum.

A wine vendor in Akkalkot called Inde, a Jangam by caste, was attracted to Vani and asked for her address. His business was selling alcohol and hemp. He was also an expert knife-wielder and had been in prison several times. He was on the blacklist of the police as he had murdered his first wife. He was also quite old for Vani. He came to us once as a customer for liquor. He got drunk and also made Kaka drink. When drunk he said he wanted to marry Vani. Kaka took both Inde and Vani to Tuljapur and got them married.

I went to our community hall where Shrimantanna and Umbrya were patching up the dead body of a calf. The calf belonged to Jagannath

Patil. The cow wouldn't let anyone milk her. So, they were stuffing the dead calf with bran, dry leaves, and hay to make an effigy.

The calf had been skinned and its skin was hung to dry. The cow, the mother of that calf, had stopped yielding milk. Now Shrimantanna and Umbrya were making an effigy of that calf. The cow would see the effigy of her calf and yield milk. It was stuffed with hay, its legs supported by wooden sticks. They were stitching the carcass with a big needle as if it was a sack of grain.

Even an animal is full of affection. The mother cow shows her affection to her calf even if it is only stuffed and lifeless. Seeing the effigy the mother moos, licks her calf, and her milk oozes. Man then puts the effigy away and milks the cow. Man is but an effigy.

I think we would be able to understand the mooing of a cow for her calf only if we skin a newborn child, stuff it with cotton and rags, patch it up, and hand it over to the mother to feed it.

My friends Parshya, Umbrya, Mallya, are all married by now. All of them have children. Harya too is married. I witnessed the arrivals and the departures of many seasons, blossoms followed by the fall, the cycle of human seasons and the end of seasons.

Man is a tree on which the leaves of old age grow. The leaves grow drier day by day. Death uproots man like a storm would a tree. Santamai, the last child of Satubaap, was growing old. Dada had become unmanageable these days. From birth onwards man is constantly speeding towards the shores of death. To avoid death, man runs continuously on the playground of life, he often stumbles.

Parshya's mother Housamai died. Lakhubaap too had grown old. I gave him ten paise for bidies the other day, for which he blessed me profusely. Why doesn't Lakhubaap use black magic to fight his poverty? Why doesn't he bring money to his hut from the lockers of the rich? Why doesn't he invoke black gods to break the necks of the rich moneylenders? Why does he starve if he knows black magic?

I was surprised when Harya accompanied his son to invite me to his place. Perhaps he had remarried. I recalled something that had happened five years ago. Harya was married to his niece. Thev lived happily for

the first few months and then Jagannath Patil's son lured her away. The news spread all over the village as well as the Maharwada. Harya caught his wife red-handed with Bhimanna. He secured the room from outside and sent word to his sister that her daughter had drowned in a well and died. Harya's sister, that is his mother-in-law, and her husband came rushing and crying. Then Harya opened the door and showed them their daughter, his wife.

Harya was ready with a knife to cut his wife's nose and breasts. But everybody intervened, telling him that after all she was his niece. Harya trembled with rage. Five years had passed since this event. Now Harya's wife too came to invite me. I was surprised and glad that they were reconciled and were living together happily.

I was visiting home and when I was about to enter I heard someone quarrelling inside. Nagi was crying and Masamai was angry. Though already married to Nagi, Nandu had married some other girl. But he wouldn't admit it. Masamai, who could see her ruined daughter's bleak future, was mad with rage. Masamai kept questioning Nandu again and again but he was silent. Masamai shouted, 'Get me that sword and I will see how he won't admit it.' Nagi was crying continuously. Finally Nandu admitted that he had remarried. I came away without stepping into my house.

Dada, Santamai, and I were having our meal when Parshya came saying that his wife was in labour. Santamai stopped eating and went to attend to the woman.

My leave came to an end. My wife Kusum was with her mother in Barshi as she was expected to have her baby any day. I wanted to visit her. As I had planned to drop by at Sholapur for a day, I prepared to leave in the evening.

When the time for my departure came everyone gathered around me. Santamai, Dada, Kaka, Masamai, Nagi, Nandu, Vanmala, Pramila, Sunanda, Shrikant, Indira—all came to say farewell. There was still some time for the bus to leave.

At last the bus arrived and I entered it. There was no work for Dada as a porter so he approached and said, 'Be careful when you spend money.' He went to the conductor and said, 'This boy is my grandson. He is a sahib in the telephone department.'

The conductor rang the bell and the bus set off. Every moment I was going further away from home.

I got down at Sholapur. By chance I met an old friend of mine. He offered me a cup of tea so we went to a tea shop. We talked for quite some time. When he asked me to go to his house I couldn't refuse.

Mallya was an old friend of mine. We came from the same village. He worked hard and overcame his poverty. Now he was not badly off as he worked in a bank. Mallya had undergone an intellectual transformation. He was married and his mother was staying with him. This person from a slum had now become well-to-do, though he had very little education. His house was also well furnished. He didn't know that my book had been published. Though born a Dalit he had not read Dalit literature.

Mallya's mother was rather uncomfortable while she talked to me. Once upon a time this woman, Hiramaushi, used to wear rags, as she had no other clothes, and had gone around gathering dung. This woman who used to wear a nine-yard sari was now in a six-yard sari like a modern woman. Instead of a bodice she wore a blouse. She had also changed her hair style. Mallya, her son, was now a sahib, hence this transformation. The mother of a sahib should live accordingly.

Next morning I boarded the bus to Barshi. My destination was Latur. I had to reach there at the earliest as my leave from work had ended. My mind was crowded with innumerable problems. It circled like a whirlwind. A man with a blue cap was travelling with me. He must be a member of the Republican Party of India. I offered him the seat next to me. Perhaps he had guessed my caste.

The moment I got down at Barshi I got the news that my wife Kusum had had a baby boy. I had already thought of a name for him. It was Anaarya. I extended my leave. I wrote a letter home announcing the arrival of Anaarya.

At this early age of twenty-five or twenty-six I had to contend with so many responsibilities. My eighteen-year-old wife had delivered three times already. I felt I was going up and down a slide, in the ups and downs of life. Your turban would fall if you tried to gauge the height and you would feel giddy if you looked into the abyss.

Today happens to be the day of Ramzan. It's Dada's festival, as he is Muslim. Dada must have gone to the market on Wednesday and bought a shirt for himself on credit. He must have gone to the mosque to pray. Santamai must be visiting some Muslim home asking for sheerkoorma.

Who will undertake Dada's funeral after his death? Will Muslims attend his cremation? How can they perform rituals after his death? Where would they bury his body? What will happen to his corpse? What will its fate be? In which graveyard will they cremate him? Would people come for the rituals on Santamai's and Masamai's deaths? Why this labyrinth of customs? Who has created such values of right and wrong, and what for? If they consider my birth illegitimate what values am I to follow?

Glossary

akkarmashi	:	impure, incomplete, an illegitimate child
aale koom salaam	:	Islamic greeting; literally, peace be to you.
akshata	:	rice grains, coloured with turmeric and saffron, showered on the bride and bridegroom as a blessing—the symbol of fertility and well-being.
Ambabai	:	a popular Hindu mother goddess.
Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar	:	(1892–1956) A great luminary and parliamentarian hailed as their guiding light by the Dalit community.
Anaarya	:	Arya means noble, high born; so anaarya is the opposite.
anna	:	1. elder brother 2. a coin in Indian currency no longer in use.
Ashwathama	:	a character from the Mahabharata, cursed by Lord Krishna to live with a putrifying scalp wound.
baluta	:	hereditary manual work on yearly contract, to be paid for only in kind, a common practice in Indian villages.
Bandenawaj	:	a fifteenth-century Sufi saint.
bhabi	:	one's elder brother's wife.
Bhagawat Gita	:	a section from the Indian epic Mahabharata, that carries a philosophical dialogue between Lord Krishna and the Pandava prince, Arjuna.
bhakari	:	unleavened bread made of millet.

Bhanamati : a sort of black magic practised only in Maharashtra.

Bhutalsidh : a dark deity.

bidi : dried tobacco leaves rolled into a home-made cigarette.

Bismillah : literally in the name of God. Uttered by Muslims before meals or any auspicious activity.

bombil : a variety of fish.

Brahma : creator of the universe, the first of the Hindu triad.

Brahmin : the highest caste in the Hindu social system. They are traditionally scholars and priests.

chapati : wheat bread.

chappal : open sandals.

chiwda : a spicy mixture of puffed rice, and cereals fried and mixed with chilli powder and other things like peanuts, gram, etc.

Chokha Mahar : a saint poet of the Mahar community, a contemporary of Saint Namdeo (fourteenth century AD). He was killed when the ramparts of Mangalwedha, where he was compelled to work as an unpaid labourer, collapsed.

chutney : chillies pounded into a paste with salt and fried.

cowri : conch shell. Used as a currency and as a symbol of the female genitals. Strung into necklaces by devadasis.

Dalit : the downtrodden, lower class. Outside the fourth category in the hierarchy of the Indian varna or caste system.

Dalit panthers : militant organization of young Dalits.

Dalitsthan : the land of Dalits.

Dasera : 1. 10th day of the Ashwin month—the seventh month according to the Hindu calendar, during September and October.

2. marking the anniversary when the demon Ravana was defeated and killed by Sri Rama in the epic Ramayana.

Dandakaryanya : the forest to which Rama, his wife Sita and brother Lakshman were exiled for fourteen years. (Ramayana)

devadasi : a dancer-prostitute dedicated to the deity and the patrons of a temple.

Dhangars : the shepherd community.

dhoti : a garment; five yards of fine white cloth, worn waist to ankle, by Indian men.

Dhritarashtra : the blind king, father of a hundred sons (the Kauravas), in the Mahabharata.

Dhruva : the neglected son of King Uttanapadi and Suniti.

Eklavya : a character from the Mahabharata, he was from a tribal community and an expert archer. His master and teacher, Dronacharya, who had refused to teach him archery because of his low birth demanded the thumb of his right hand as a fee so that Eklavya would not supercede prince Arjuna in archery.

15th August : India's Independence Day.

Gandhari : King Dhritarashtra's queen. She vowed to live blind-folded because her husband was blind. (Mahabharata).

ganja : hemp.

ghee : clarified butter.

Gondhali : a community of singers devoted to the Goddess Bhawani. They sing lengthy folk songs on auspicious occasions like birth and marriage, usually at night. They move in pairs: one the singer and another who plays on an instrument called the sambal.

gudi : a sort of flag with a pole at the top of which is tied a silk sari and an auspicous vase. Erected as a symbol of the beginning of a new year.

guru : a spirtual master or guide.

Haidari Khwaja : a Muslim saint.

Hajimalang : a Muslim saint circa thirteenth century AD, his tomb on a mountain near Kalyan is venerated by Hindus as well as Muslims.

Harivijaya : a poetic composition, by the saint poet Shridhar narrating the deeds of Lord Krishna.

Id : a Muslim festival.

imam : a Muslim priest who conducts namaz or mass prayer in a mosque.

Indrajal : black magic.

Ithoba : a form of Lord Vishnu installed in a temple at Pandharpur. The cult god of the Warkari sect.

Jai Bhim! : a way of greeting among the Dalits who are the followers of Dr Bhimrao or Babasaheb Ambedkar.

jangam : a priest of the Lingayat community who is supposed to be a mobile sacred linga (a symbol of Lord Shiva).

Jarasandh : a mythical character from the epic Mahabharata, who was invincible. Even if torn assunder his body would reunite and heal.

jalebi : a sweet.

Jijamai : the mother of Shivaji.

jogtin : a female devotee of goddess Yallama.

jogtya : a male devotee of goddess Yallama.

jowar : millet.

kabbadi : a game in which the players hold their breath while competing.

Karna : a tragic character in Mahabharata renowned for his archery and limitless charity. The orgin of his birth (half-brother to the Pandavas) was a secret and he was raised by a charioteer. Undaunted by what he believed to be his lowly origins, he strove to make a mark.

Kashi : a centre of Hindu pilgrimage.

Kashikhand : an ancient text describing the holiness of Kashi and its environs.

Khandoba : a folk deity, reincarnation of Lord Shiva.

Ker day : the day after Pola, a festival of bulls when they are worshipped and not worked.

kheer : a pudding.

Khokayai : a female deity worshipped to cure coughs.

Kokeshastra : ancient Indian science of eroticism composed by Koka.

kotwal : a village official, a post in the police hierarchy.

kumkum : the round, red mark placed on the forehead by Indian women as a symbol of their married status.

Kunbies : a caste or community of cultivators.

Kunti : the mother of three of the five Pandava brothers in the Mahabharata. Also, mother of Karna.

Laginshaa : a Muslim saint.

Lakshagruha : a palace made of resin, constructed by Purochan. The Pandavas were to be burnt alive there (Mahabharata).

lathi : cane.

Laxmi : goddess of wealth.

lezim : cymbals fitted in a chain on a wooden rod, a game played by a team.

linga : the phallus-shaped icon, symbolizing the creative power of Lord Shiva.

Lingayat : a community who worship Lord Veera Shiva.

madder : a plant with milky, poisonous fluid.

Mahadev : another name for Lord Shiva.

Mahar : a so-called low caste in the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system. They are the village guards, messengers and are attached to the office of the village administration.

Maharwada : a locality of the Mahar community.

mama : maternal uncle.

Mang : another so-called low caste in the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system. Makers of strings and ropes from hemp.

mantra : chants or spells.

Manu : a sage, the supposed author of a book of social customs and rules called *Manusmriti* (600 BC–AD 300) probably a work of several generations.

mangalashtak : an auspicious eight-stanza composition sung at weddings.

mangalsutra : a talisman the bridegroom ties around the neck of his bride. Sanctified, it ensures his long life.

Maratha : the warrior class of Maharashtra.

Mariai : (folk) mother goddess, supposed to ward off calamities especially epidemics.

Markandpuran : a mythic composition about the god Khandoba also called Markand.

Marwari : a business community of businessmen and traders from Marwar, Rajasthan.

Masoba : a folk deity.

Mayadevi : the mother of Lord Gautama Buddha.

milo jowar : millet brought to India from Australia.

Mughal : Mongolian invaders who ruled India from Delhi from AD 1526 to 1857.

Namaskar : a way of greeting among Hindus.

Namoh Buddha : salutation to Lord Buddha.

Navnathkathasagar : a poetic composition extolling the deeds of nine great ascetics of the Nath sect.

neem : *Azadirachta Indica*, a common Indian tree with great medical properties.

om : the most sacred syllable in the Hindu religion, the symbol of Brahma the ultimate reality.

paan : betel leaf.

Panchayat Rajya : the village council.

Pandavpratap : a poetic composition extolling the deeds of the five Pandava brothers.

Patil : a village chief/a surname/a member of the Maratha community in Indian villages is always addressed as Patil as a token of respect.

pedha : a sweet made of thickened milk.

phugadi : a game played mostly by girls.

Phule : Mahatma Jyotiba Govinda Phule, who by his writings created a sharp awareness about the injustices against the lower castes.

Pola : the ox-festival.

Potraj : a devotee of Goddess Bhawani colourfully attired, masquerading as a long-haired lady, dancing to the drum.

pujari : a Hindu priest.

Pundalik : the mythical devotee of Lord Vithal Pandharpur.

Rama : Sri Ramachandra, the seventh incarnation of Sri Mahavishnu, the hero of Ramayana, the great religio-literary epic.

Rama's sandals : in the Ramayana Lord Rama's brother Bharata placed his exiled brother's footwear on the throne of Ayodhya and ruled in his brother's name.

Ramzan : the sacred month during which Muslims observe a fast.

Razakar : in the Hyderabad state of the Nizam there was a militant organization led by Kas Razvi to liberate the State from Hindu dominance and British rule. The members of this organization were called the Razakars or the Liberators.

Republican : a political party founded by Dr Ambedkar. Its followers are mostly from the Nav-Buddha community.

saheb : an officer, equivalent of sir.

sarpanch : the elected village head.

Satwai : a folk goddess worshipped on the fifth day after a child's birth. She is supposed to write the future of the child on his/her forehead.

Shabari : a tribal woman-character from the Ramayana. While in exile Lord Rama passes through her village. A devotee of Rama she presents him with ber (fruit) tasting them before offering them to him to confirm whether or not they were sweet.

sher : a kind of plant.

Shivleelamrut : a poetic composition describing the deeds of Lord Shiva and his devotees.

Shivaji : the Maratha hero—warrior and king (1630–80).

Shiva : the third member of the Hindu Trinity, the other two being Brahma and Vishnu.

Shrawan : the fifth month according to the Hindu calender, approximately the month of August.

Siddhartha : the real name of Gautama Buddha.

Sidhayappa : a Shaiva saint.

Simhasan-battishi : a book of folk tales extolling the three qualities of Raja Vikram narrated by female statues fixed to the throne.

Sita : the wife of Sri Rama, in the Ramayana.

teli : a community whose occupation is the extraction of edible oil.

tonga : a horse-cart.

toran : leaves woven on a string, hung at the entrance door on auspicious occasions.

Totamaina : seventy-two erotic tales about the deceitful nature of both men and women.

Tuljapur : a centre of pilgrimage.

tulsi : the basil plant.

26th January : India's Republic Day.

Vetalpanchvishi : twenty-five folk tales in which a vetal (a ghoul) tells stories to Raja Vikramaditya who solves the riddles and ultimately triumphs over the vetal.

Vithal : a folk deity of Pandharpur called Pandurang.

Wadaars : a community of stone dressers.

Waghya : a male devotee of Yallama, dressed like a female.

Wani : a business community.

Yallama : a female folk deity.

Yama : God of Death.

Zilla Parishad : the district council.

Limbale's autobiography is the frighteningly candid story of his childhood and growth as a fatherless boy in a village in Maharashtra. It raises the ultimate question in social ethics, namely 'What is morality?'

As a single-parent child of an 'untouchable' Mahar woman in a caste-conscious community, life is an excruciating experience. The daily injustices are compounded by Limbale's abject poverty, which forces him to think nothing beyond getting his next meal—a bowl of gruel.

Amidst Limbale's wants and woes, one finds a saintly forgiveness, compassion, and detachment —a quest to understand the meaning of the world. Even towards the women in his life, who have been exploited and deserted, there is no blame or pity, just an acceptance of their plight in life as such.

This philosophically potent and poetically powerful narrative makes the reader introspect deeply, which is what all great literary works must do.

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